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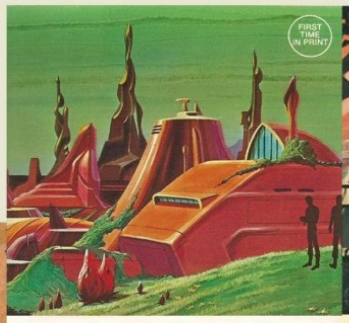

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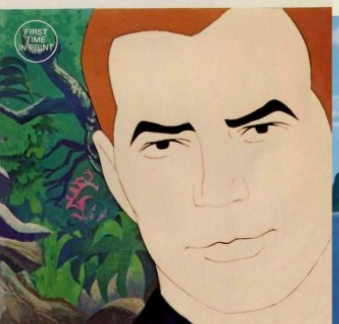

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BEYOND THE FARTHEST STAR

(Adapted from a script by Samuel A. Peeples)

I

Veil of stars.

Veil of crystal.

On the small viewscreen the image of the Milky Way glittered like powdered sugar fused to black velvet.

Here in the privacy of the captain's cabin on board the *Enterprise*, James T. Kirk had at fingertip's call all the computerized resources of an expanding, organized galactic Federation in taped and microfilmed form. Art, music, painting, sculpture, kinetology, science, history, philosophy—the memory banks of the great starship held enough material to satiate the mind of any civilized being. Satisfy and fulfill him whether in the mood for matters profound or trivial, fleeting or permanent, whether curious about the developments of yesterday or those as old as time itself.

Yet, now, in this particular off-hour, the man responsible for guiding the *Enterprise* safely through the multitude of known hazards and an infinitude of imagined ones that lay strewn throughout space—when he could have devoted his thoughts to little things of no importance and rested his mind—chose instead to study a smaller though no less awesome version of the same scene he was compelled to view so many times from the commander's chair on the bridge of the starship.

His eyes strayed idly to the lower corner of the screen. Gossamer thin threads of crimson and azure marked a spectacular nebula of recent origin—the flaming headstone marking the grave of some long vanished star, perhaps marking also a cemetery for a great, doomed civilization, caught helpless when its sun exploded.

Men in his position who would have deliberately chosen to observe such a sight fell into three categories. First were those for whom natural creation was too small. Men who found universes of greater magnitude within—artists, poets, landscapers and dreamers of hologram plays, sculptors in metal and stone and wood.

The second group would be that now dwindling but still sizable number of individuals who also looked inward—but whose gaze was forever out of focus—the catatonic, the insane, the mad . . .

The third and last assemblage fell somewhere in between, not quite artists, not quite mad. These were the men and women who forsook the solidity of Earth, gave up the certain knowledge of a definite sky overhead and unarguable ground underfoot, to ply the emptiness between the stars. Starship personnel.

James T. Kirk was a captain among such, a leader of this kind—which made him, depending on which extreme you tended toward, either a frustrated artist or a well-composed madman.

He sighed and rolled over on the bed, temporarily trading the pocket-view of infinity for the cool, pale blue of the preformed cabin ceiling.

A visit to the Time Planet, where all the time lines of this galaxy converged—and who knew, perhaps those of others as well, for men knew nothing of other galaxies except what little they could see through their attenuated glass eyes—was their present assignment. A pity that time lines did not choose to make themselves visible to man's puny instruments of detection. Only one race had found that secret.

It hadn't saved them.

A visit to the Time Planet was always interesting. That wasn't its designated name, of course. But popular conceptions had a way of overwhelming scientific notation. He smiled slightly. There were enough new shocks, enough running discoveries taking place every time a new section of space was charted to cause the once unbelievable Time Planet to recede into the land of the commonplace.

Kirk was a starship captain, not a historian. So his prime interest in the Time Planet was from the standpoint of its curious chemistry and even more curious physics. The trip promised to be at least as interesting as previous ones. But it was no longer possessed of that special thrill.

The remarkable view of the Milky Way in the tiny screen was as complete a portrait of the galaxy as anyone was ever likely to see. Few probes, even unmanned ones, had flown

further outside the galactic rim than the *Enterprise* was now speeding. Starships were too expensive to operate and too scattered for Starfleet Command to waste them on, say, just convoying experiments from world to world.

That's why the *Enterprise* had swung wider than its best course to the Time Planet, to enable it to take readings and star-map this section of the galaxy's fringe.

Kirk flipped a switch on the tiny console by the bed and was rewarded with the view out the starboard side of the ship—a view of almost unrelieved blackness. Here and there were tiny dots of luminescence, dots which were not individual stars, but rather distant galaxies—some vaster, some more modest than our own.

Thoughts uncommon to most men raced through the deepest pools of his mind as he contemplated that yawning, frightening intergalactic pit. Someday, he mused, someday we'll have engines that won't burn out at warp-maximum eight or nine. Someday we'll have engines capable of driving a ship at warp ninety, or even warp nine hundred.

Someday.

Of course, the spatial engineers and physicists were agreed that it was impossible for any form of matter to travel faster than warp nine. Kirk thought that this belief was simply a modern superstition. It had also been said that man would never be able to fly or, wonder of wonders, exceed the speed of light.

An inship communicator buzzed insistently for attention. Again. Kirk looked at it irritably, then remembered that he'd blocked off the channel. In effect, he'd hung out a *Do Not Disturb* sign. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. There was nothing for it but to answer.

There were only two men on the starship who were on permanent, round-the-clock call. Doctor McCoy was one. He was the other. He opened the channel.

"Kirk here."

"Spock, Captain."

It was only a trick of aural mechanics, true, but somehow the monotone of his assistant commander seemed less

distorted by intervening kilometers of solid-and fluid-state circuitry than the voice of anyone else on board.

No, not completely monotone—for now he heard a definite hint of puzzlement in Spock's tone.

"Captain, I hate to bother you during your rest period, but we have encountered what appears to be a unique and extremely peculiar situation—"

That woke Kirk up. "An extremely peculiar situation" to Spock could be anything from just mildly serious at best to imminent disaster at worst.

"Be right up, Mr. Spock." He flipped the switch off, threw on his captain's tunic, dilated the door, and headed for the bridge double-quick.

Behind him, the miniature glowing panorama of the intergalactic gulf, forgotten, patiently awaited his return.

The elevator paused once, at B-deck, where Spock joined him. At the same time, the lights in the lift car and in the disappearing corridor beyond began to flicker. An all too familiar uneven yowling sounded.

"General Alarm." He looked at Spock, who replied to the unasked question.

"Lieutenant Commander Scott should be the officer of the deck, I believe."

"Why didn't he call me direct?"

"He did not say, Captain. But I think, if I interpret Mr. Scott's actions correctly, that he did not feel qualified to interrupt the Captain's rest period for a phenomenon of as yet undefinable proportions. He left that up to me."

Kirk considered that as the lift halted once more at the last level below the bridge. Dr. McCoy joined them.

"Jim . . . Spock . . . what's happening?"

"I don't know yet, Bones," Kirk said honestly. "You know as much as we do. Something that Scotty felt strongly enough about to sound the general alarm for."

Seconds later the doors split, and the three walked onto the bridge.

Helmsman Sulu was working busily at the navigation station. Uhura glanced back and forth between her communications console and Sulu. And from the engineering station, Scott looked up at their arrival and let out a visible sigh of relief.

"Glad to see you, Captain. I wasn't ready for makin' too many more decisions. Not considerin' the nature of this thing, whatever it is."

Spock went directly to his library computer seat—the control station for the brain and nervous system of the *Enterprise*. As Kirk took his own place in the command chair, he noted that the alarm system was still sounding its howling warning.

"That's enough noise, Mr. Sulu." Sulu nodded. Lights and alarm returned to normal status.

"Situation, Mr. Scott?"

Kirk was already studying the projected vector-grid Sulu had thrown up on the main screen. In a lower right-hand quadrant, the white dot of the *Enterprise* was moving rapidly centerward—too rapidly, Kirk thought.

He envied the old sea captains of Earth's ancient days, when a vessel's energy came only from the blowing winds, envied a skipper who could feel a change in his ship's speed through his feet. Out here in black, uncaring vacuum, there was nothing to push against, nothing to feel against you. Compared to a rambunctious sea or strong gale, artificial gravity was a poor stimulant.

Man's senses only operated here artificially, through enormous mechanical amplification—and the only waves one could get the feel of were in wave mechanics.

"We've picked up speed, sir," informed Scott, confirming Kirk's analysis of the situation depicted on the screen. "A great deal of speed!"

"Cut back, then, Scotty."

"I've already done so, sir—cut back twice—but we continue to gain momentum!"

"Now don't get excited, Mr. Scott—" The question had to be asked, despite any damage that might incur to the engineer's pride. "—but have you checked your instrumentation?"

"Aye, Captain, checked, and triple-checked. I'd prefer the instrumentation *were* off, than to have to proceed with these readings. No sir, the information is correct." He gestured in the direction of the vector-grid.

Kirk swiveled slightly in the chair. "Mr. Sulu?"

If anything, Sulu's expression was twice as worried and half again as uncertain as the chief engineer's.

"She's not answering the helm, sir! We're—" he paused to check his own readouts, "—two minutes right ascension off course." He hammered at the stubborn controls in front of him, as if that might have some naturalizing effect on the incredible information coming in.

"And drifting farther off every second, sir."

"Mr. Spock."

"Captain?"

"Do me an in-depth computer-library scan on all known major stellar bodies in this fringe sector."

"Yes, Captain."

"And put it up on the big screen when it's ready."

There was a brief, quiet pause. Nothing moved on the bridge except the white dot of the *Enterprise* on the view-screen. Then the vector-grid was replaced by another, an overlay star-map. Or rather, part of the grid was replaced. Three-quarters of the screen did not light up with the light blue of completed mappings. It remained maddeningly blank —except for one large word in yellow, a word Kirk had almost expected to see.

UNEXPLORED

A second later, information appeared beneath this first disappointing word in the form of the legend.

To Be Mapped—No Accurate Data Currently Available.

"That's what I thought, Mr. Spock. But there was a chance. Information comes into Starfleet's banks so fast these days."

"Evidently not fast enough, Captain."

"No. Not fast enough. That'll do, Spock."

The uninformative star-map overlay blanked out and the vector-grid dominated the entire screen once more.

"Captain?" The call came from the rear of the bridge.

"Yes, Uhura?"

She seemed confused. "Captain, I've been picking up strong, but very strange radio emissions for the past two hours. Both source and direction were at first far to the right plane of our course. But since our position has been shifting, the source of emission and the course of the *Enterprise* are lining up."

Kirk considered this piece of news. It was not especially foreboding. Not yet, anyway.

"All right, Uhura, I'll keep it in mind." He looked back at the screen. "At least there's something out there."

The white pinpoint continued to move purposefully across the grid, drawn by . . . what? He could reach out with a forefinger and blot the great starship from view. At the same time he reached a decision. While whatever was pulling them off course had shown nothing that could be definitely interpreted as a hostile action—it was probably a natural phenomenon anyway—it still behooved them to put up some form of resistance.

"Mr. Sulu, stand by to back engines."

"Standing by, sir." Sulu divided his attention between the screen and his bank of controls.

"Back engines."

The helmsman's hands moved over the navigation console, flipped a last knob 180 degrees. A slight jar traveled through the bridge, followed by a distant but distinct rumbling. Everyone made an instinctive grab for the nearest solid object. But only the slight jar gave evidence of the tremendous stresses operating on the starship.

Kirk stared at the vector-grid intently. The white dot slowed perceptibly, slowed . . . but continued on its new path, moving inexorably forward.

"Mr. Spock," Kirk demanded, "have you got anything yet?" We'd operate a helluva lot more effectively if we had some idea of what we were up against, Kirk thought.

Spock had remained glued to the hooded viewer of the computer readout. Now he looked up and over at the captain's position.

"At this point, Captain, I can only say we are headed toward an unknown object—probably natural, probably of at least planetary mass—that is generating a remarkable amount of hyper-gravity. Hyper-gravity more concentrated than any we have ever encountered."

"Well, if there's something like that out there," and Kirk gestured at the screen, "that can put out that kind of pull plus radio emissions, why aren't our evaluative sensors picking it up?" He rolled his fingers against one leg. "Open the forward scanners all the way, Mr. Sulu, and close off everything else. Divert all sensor power forward."

"All of it, sir?"

"All of it."

There was a moment's rush of activity as Sulu hurried to comply with the order. It left them uncomfortably vulnerable to anything that might choose to sneak up on the ship from any direction but ahead. But what could be sneaking around, out here on the galaxy's rim?

The screen flickered. The vector-grid vanished. Extending from the left side of the screen two-thirds of the way across now was the outermost arm of the Milky Way. A distant, ethereal packing of rainbow-hued dust. The other third, except for a few scattered, lonely spots of brilliance, was black with the blackness of the intergalactic abyss.

But in the center of the screen . . .

In the center, something was taking a smooth, crescent-shaped bite out of the glowing star-mist that formed the arm. Something spherical, small—but growing. A globe of nothingness that was obscuring star after star.

No, not entirely nothing, now. As they moved nearer, a distant, faint glint gave evidence of a solid surface. Fascinated, Kirk and the rest of the bridge personnel stared at the unknown, dark wanderer. They tried to define, pin down, regularize its maddeningly elusive silhouette.

Uhura finally broke the silence.

"Captain, that's definitely the source of the emissions. They've changed considerably since I first detected them. And they've also grown much stronger since we've moved close."

"Pipe them over the communicators, Uhura. Don't keep it a secret."

She hit a single control. Immediately the bridge was filled with a shrill, piercing electronic hum. She smiled apologetically and reduced the deafening volume. As the sound became bearable one thing was instantly obvious to the lowliest ensign. That whine was too wild, too powerful to come from an artificial source. It was as natural an extrusion of the object ahead as a solar prominence or a man's arm. It was definitely not the product of a constructed beacon or station.

Everyone listened to the alien hum as the outline on the viewscreen continued to grow, eating away at the distant star-field.

"Mr. Scott, ready your engineers for a maximum effort."

"Aye, sir." Scott turned to his direct line back to engineering.

"Davis, Gradner, get off your duffs! The captain's going to be wantin' some work out 'o ye in a moment—"

"Mr. Sulu," Kirk continued, "stay on these back engines."

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Spock," and Kirk tried not to sound desperate, "anything yet?"

"Sir, I've had the computers working since we first entered the peculiar gravity-well, but I hesitated to offer an opinion on preliminary sensor data alone. Now that we have achieved visual confirmation, I no longer hesitate."

Spock's eyebrows shot way up, which surprised Kirk. For Spock that was an expression of astonishment equivalent to an audible gasp from a human. Something unique was surely in the offing.

"It is a negative star-mass, Captain, Spectroanalysis confirms finally ninety-seven point eight percent probability that the object ahead of us is composed of imploded matter. Every reading on material composition records in the negative."

"Great! That means we're headed toward an immensely powerful aggregation of nothing?"

"That is rather more colloquial than I should put it, Captain, but it is effectively descriptive."

Sulu chose that moment to interrupt with additional happy news. "Captain, our speed is increasing again!"

That did it. "All engines, full reverse thrust!"

There was a long pause as another jar and a following rumble ran through the *Enterprise*. Then Sulu looked up from the helm. He didn't appear panicked—he was too good an officer for that—but he was clearly worried.

"It's no good, sir, we're still falling toward it."

"Mr. Scott," said Kirk tightly, "what's the matter with those engines of yours?"

"There's nothin' wrong with the engines, sir," the chief engineer replied evenly. "They're doin' their best, sir, but they're badly overmatched. They're designed to push . . . not pull against a gravity-well as deep as this! I'm not sure we could pull free now if we had ten times the power."

Kirk looked back at the screen, where the negative stellar mass now all but filled the forward view, blotting out the last visible stars. With the decreased distance, more of the surface had become visible. Dull black in color, it was pockmarked with ancient craters—uneven and clearly, inarguably dead. Occasionally a startlingly bright bolt of electrical energy would arc between high points on the surface, leaping from crag to crag like a stone skipping over a pond.

To be visible at such a distance the bolts must have been enormous.

"How much time do we have?"

Spock replied easily, evenly, without looking away from his viewer. "Impact in ninety-three seconds, Captain. Ninety-two . . . ninety-one . . ."

Stunned silence suddenly filled the bridge. It had all happened so fast. One minute they were in minor difficulty, experiencing some strange, slight course deflection, and then —

No one saw the strange expression come over Uhura's face. She flicked a long nail against one earphone, then the other. No, the instruments were working properly, all right.

"Captain, I'm picking up a new signal. Listen." She moved delicate fingers over the console.

The drone of the dead star filled the bridge. But sounding over it now was a second, distinct whine, almost a wailing cry. More importantly, the sound was clearly modulated, obviously emanating from an artificial source. It faded in and out at lonely, regular intervals.

"Forty seconds, Captain," intoned Spock. For all the excitement he exhibited he might as well have been reciting the time left on a baking cake.

"Thirty-nine . . . thirty-eight . . ."

Inside, Kirk was fuming. Time, time . . .! They couldn't go forward and they couldn't go back. That left . . .

"Mr. Sulu!" he barked abruptly. "Flank speed ahead! Declension thirty degrees."

"*Ahead*, sir?"

"MOVE IT, MR. SULU!" The helmsman moved. Maybe the hyper-gravity helped.

"We've got one chance at this point. That's to make a safe orbit. After that, we can figure out a way to break away at our leisure. I need more than thirty seconds for that."

Sulu moved rapidly at the controls. His body became a soft, fleshy extension of the *Enterprise*'s navigation system. Like Aladdin, he had only to present his wishes in comprehensible form and the electronic genie would handle the details.

But would it have enough ability to counter the titanic black demon sucking them forward to destruction?

Kirk stared at the screen, now wholly occupied by the shape of the dead star. If their bid for orbit failed, no one would ever know it. The death of the *Enterprise* wouldn't even be recorded by an idle astronomer on some distant planet as a tiny flash in far space. The massive gravity-well of the negative mass would swallow light as well as life.

"Nine seconds," came Spock's calm voice. Only a slight rise in pitch betrayed any hint of anxiety, excitement. "Eight . . . seven . . ."

It was absurd Kirk thought, holding tightly to the command chair! That wouldn't prolong his life by the minutest fraction of a second. But his hands continued to grip the unyielding metal nonetheless.

An electrical discharge thousands of kilometers in length lit the screen for an instant, impossibly close. Then, it was gone —and so was the blackness. Ahead once again lay the friendly, fluorescing mists of the galaxy, and the honest darkness of open space.

But Kirk knew this vision of escape was illusory. A second later Sulu confirmed it.

"No breakaway, Captain, but insertion accomplished." He sighed in visible relief. "Details of orbit to follow. We'll have a low perigee, damn low, but—" he smiled, "not low enough to drop us out of orbit."

"Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition!" called Scott.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Scott?"

"Nothin', Spock, nothin'."

"I beg your pardon again, Mr. Scott, but you definitely said something, not nothing." Scott gave him a pained look, and Spock suddenly comprehended.

"Ah, I see. The use of nonreferential archaic terminology served to audibilize the otherwise inexpressible emotions you felt at the moment."

"So would a punch in the snoot, pointy-ears!" warned the chief engineer.

"Is that a further audibilization?"

Kirk looked away so they wouldn't see the broad grin spreading across his face.

"Give up, Mr. Scott, you're fighting a losing battle."

"Aye, Captain," acknowledged Scott disgustedly. "I've an easier time communicatin' with a number-four automatic welder!" Then he too smiled, but only briefly. Current thoughts were too serious.

"Speakin' of which, Captain, if we don't need the power right now, it'd be a good thing for the engines to go on minimum, after all the time they spent puttin' out maximum reverse thrust."

"Yes, of course, Scotty. Mr. Sulu, compute the minimum drive we need to hold this orbit without falling and feed the data to Mr. Scott for issuance to engineering."

"Yes, sir." Moments later, "Ready, sir."

"Fine, Lieutenant. Now activate rear scanners and put our stern towards the mass."

There was a wait while the view in the big screen seemed to rotate. Actually it was the ship that was changing position and not the universe. The star-field was gradually replaced by a fresh picture, a view of the ebony sphere turning slowly below them.

"Mr. Spock, final orbit confirmation?"

"We are holding this orbital configuration easily, Captain. Effectively standoff has been achieved."

"Good. Steady as she goes, then, Mr. Sulu."

"Aye, aye, sir." The lieutenant couldn't keep an admiring tone from creeping into his voice. Kirk glanced away, slightly embarrassed.

Dr. McCoy observed the captain's reaction and grinned. No one had noticed his arrival on the bridge. They had all been, to say the least, otherwise occupied. For his part, McCoy had kept quiet. He had had nothing to say that could have been of any help, and the situation when he had arrived called for anything but a dose of his dry wit.

Now, however, some idle conversation might have its therapeutic values. He had a degree in that, as well as in medicine.

"If its pull is so strong, Jim, how do we ever break out of its grip?"

"What? Oh, hello, Bones." Kirk turned his chair a little. "One thing at a time. If we'd known what we were heading for soon enough, I'd have at least tried a cometary orbit. But by the time we knew for sure what we were up against, it was too late." He looked over at the library console.

"But you're right—it's a question we'll have to deal with eventually. How about a slingshot effect, Mr. Spock? Have we got enough power to break out at the last second? We can run on maximum overdrive for the necessary time. We'll have to dive as close as possible to the surface before pulling out, to make maximum use of the gravity-well's catapulting power. If we don't make it, we'll end up so many odd-sized blobs on the surface. Don't forget, Bones, it's attractive force increases exponentially as we near the actual surface."

Spock didn't answer the opening query right away, instead stayed bent over the viewer and continued to work.

"I'll need some time for the computations to go through, Captain. Power, orbit, proper distance from the stellar surface, angle of descent, crucial altitude. Information is still coming in through our sensors at a tremendous rate. Our knowledge of hyper-gravity is woefully slim. This is the first time a starship has been so close to a negative stellar mass. At least, the first time one has been this close and survived.

"There are too many variables at this point for hasty calculation. I can't give you an answer yet."

"All right, Spock. Set the computer on the problem. We'll learn as we orbit. We've nothing else to do, anyway. Starfleet will go crazy over the data."

As if on cue, Uhura broke in. "Excuse me, Captain, but I'm picking up that secondary signal again. We lost it temporarily when we powered into orbit, but I've got it back." She paused. "Or else *it's* got *us* back. Nine seconds north inclination, dead ahead and closing fast."

"Is it . . .?" he began, but Uhura guessed the question.

"No, Captain. We're coming up on it, not vice-versa. Still, I wonder."

"The universe is full of coincidences, Lieutenant. How soon till sensor contact?"

"It should be on the screens in a minute, Captain."

Everyone on the bridge turned full attention to the shifting view in the main screen. For long moments there was little change in the picture. Then a faintly luminous jumble of tiny lines appeared. It began to increase rapidly in size.

Even at this distance it was easy to see that the object was an artificial construct and not a natural body. But there must be something wrong with the sensors. It was too far away to appear so large.

"Can we slow enough to match orbits, Mr. Sulu, without dropping beyond the safe range?"

Sulu fumbled with the navigation computer. "Have the answer in a second, sir." He paused. "Yes sir, no difficulty, sir. We have a respectable margin."

"Then put us alongside as we come up on it."

The object grew speedily until it dominated the viewscreen as the dead sun had before. Sulu had to reduce perspective twice to keep the entire shape in full view. Suddenly there was silence on the bridge when it became apparent what the shape was.

II

The starship was beautiful.

All the more so in contrast to the stark dead giant that held them trapped in this isolated corner of the universe. The huge *Enterprise* was an insignificant spot, a parasitic white shape alongside it.

"A thousand cathedrals all thrown together and then they added star-drive," whispered an awed McCoy. "Tossed all together and lit like a Christmas tree."

"Can it really be a starship?" murmured Uhura softly.

Spock's reply was equally hushed. "The probability is . . . considerable."

Vast arches and flying buttresses of multicolored metal and plastic soared up and out, racing in and around metallic spirals and pyramids. Here and there, gracefully designed yet massive metal pods nestled at regular intervals amid cradling arms of silver and gold and iridescent blue. Faery arms of spun alloy.

The race that had built this vessel was a race of artisans as well as engineers, poets as well as shipwrights.

"Bring us in, Mr. Sulu. Mr. Sulu?"

The lieutenant seemed to shake himself awake. "Aye, sir." He touched controls, and the *Enterprise* responded. The intricate gleaming tapestry began to move closer and then past them.

Under Sulu's skillful hands, the *Enterprise* drifted deeper into the tangle of alien crossbeams and spars. He adjusted speed and they drifted towards what seemed to be a major pod.

"It's got to be a starship!" McCoy muttered. "But, Aesculapius, the size of it!"

"True, Bones," Kirk agreed and then gestured, "but it seems that neither size nor beauty renders it invulnerable. Or maybe to something else, it wasn't so beautiful. Look!"

As they continued their inspection, it became clear that despite its massive bulk, some time in the past the alien ship had undergone stresses and strains of as yet unknown but undeniably powerful origin.

Arches and soaring spans of binding metal were torn and scorched—bent unnaturally in some places, sliced in half in others. The huge pods exhibited the most obvious, ominous signs of disaster. They were lined with rows of odd, hexagonal-shaped ports. All were cold, dark.

Dead.

Every pod was damaged. There were no exceptions. The metal floated easily in space, bloated with ruptures and tears. Deep gashes split one pod like a chrome grape.

"She was probably pulled in like we were," murmured Kirk. He didn't voice the attendant thought. Had this total destruction taken place before the alien starship was gathered in by the negative sun's gravity—or after?

And if the latter, why? More importantly, how?

Two surprises from outside were enough for any one station, but Uhura was destined to get yet a third. Idly adjusting receivers and amplifiers, she suddenly threw the sound of the secondary signal—the signal that came from this dead enigma—into the bridge again.

But it was different now. More of a stutter than a moan. And while there were no reasons, no facts to support it, everyone sensed that the strange call was now more urgent, more insistent than before.

"Confirmation, sir, final," she said excitedly. "I thought that signal was coming from the alien. Not only is there no longer any question about it, but somehow the transmitter, at least, has reacted to our presence! That's the only reason I can think of to explain this sudden change in broadcast pattern."

"I have secondary confirmation, Captain," added Spock, his eyebrows rising again, "and I should agree. But—it isn't possible. That ship is utterly, unequivocably, dead. All life-support sensors read negative. All ship-support sensors read the same. No energy is present. Temperature on board the alien is identical to that of open space—absolute zero. I have

no reason to even faintly support the contention that there is life aboard . . . biological or mechanical."

"Also, there is no evidence of any stored energy capable of generating these radio emissions. I read only a slight magnetic flux—probably normal for the vessel's metal."

"Yet you reconfirm Uhura's readings—that the signal is coming from the ship?"

Spock seemed reluctant to restate his position, but, "I have no choice, Captain. That is likewise what the sensors read."

"That doesn't make sense, Mr. Spock."

The science officer's reply was drier than usual. "We find ourselves in complete agreement, Captain. Yet," he paused briefly, "that is the case."

"You're positive?"

"Probability ninety-nine point seven, Captain."

"Ummmm." Kirk leaned back, drumming a mildly obscene ditty with his fingers on one arm of the command chair. Pursuing a confessed paradox was going to get them nowhere. Better try another tack.

"Can you identify the design of the ship or its composition, Mr. Spock?"

"Negative to both, Captain," Spock replied after a glance at the computer readout. "The readings I have so far on the alloy itself—barring actual analytical confirmation from a specimen of same—indicate a material both harder and lighter than any registered in the ship's library. As for the design, it is not a recorded type." He hesitated, glanced back at the readout.

"Something else, Mr. Spock?"

"Also, Captain, silicon dating or the vessel's spectra indicates that it has been floating in orbit here for . . ." he checked the computer figures one last time, ". . . for slightly more and not less than three hundred million terran years."

There was a concerted gasp from the bridge personnel. Everyone's attention was drawn back to the screen. Back to the delicate arches, to the dreamlike design—alien in both pattern and function to the solid, prosaic shape of the *Enterprise*.

"I should think, then, that that precludes our chances of finding any survivors aboard," Kirk murmured.

"I couldn't have put it better myself, Captain," agreed Spock.

"I just know that it's beautiful," put in Uhura, half-defiantly. "To have put such grace and perfection of form into something as functional as a starship—I wish I could have known the race that built it."

"Beauty may have nothing to do with it, Lieutenant," suggested Spock conversationally. "The design may merely conform to their own conceptions of spatial dynamics."

She turned back to her instruments, an expression of distaste coming over her perfect features.

"I might have guessed you'd say something like that, Spock."

"Don't give it a thought, Uhura," chipped in McCoy quickly. "According to his own system of spatial dynamics, Spock probably finds your form purely functional, too. Don't you, Spock?"

Sulu grinned, and even Kirk was distracted enough to smile.

Spock's reply barely hinted at mild distress. "It is very easy to tell when you are joking, Doctor—which is most of the time. It is when your statements make absolutely no sense—which is most of the time."

While the byplay continued behind him, Kirk let his attention drift back to the picture of the alien starship. He envied the long-dead commander. And yet there was a hint of unease back of all the admiration.

What could have happened to so totally destroy such a magnificent vessel, with all its unknown potentialities and abilities? Certainly it must have possessed defensive powers commensurate with its size. "A civilization advanced enough to build such a craft—three hundred million years ago! Man wasn't even an idea then in the mind of nature," he murmured.

"A second or two in the span of eternity, Jim," McCoy commented, switching abruptly from the silly to the sublime.

Sometimes McCoy's comments grew wearisome, even annoying. But when he was right, he was the rightest person

on the ship.

Kirk sighed. "All right, Spock. There's got to be an answer to this. You read no power from the vessel now. Any indication what its power source might have been?"

"No, Captain. There is apparently something new and undetectable at work here, capable of avoiding even the most delicate sensor pickup. But this far from any star with a planetary system, it goes without saying that they possessed some form of warp-drive. A most efficient one, beyond doubt, judging from the size of the craft."

Kirk continued to study the vast alien ship. As usual, the sudden flash of insight that would solve all and make him appear the most brilliant spacer since O'Morion didn't occur.

He had no business ordering what he was about to order. Every second should have been devoted to extricating the *Enterprise* from its present perilous position. Still, the lure of the incredible vessel was too strong to ignore. He hesitated. At least he could make one last check.

"Mr. Spock, how is the computer coming on the computation for a slingshot course?"

Spock consulted his viewer. "It appears it will take some time yet, Captain, for all the variables to be considered and an optimum program to be devised."

That settled it. He rose and spoke firmly.

"We'll board her, then. Scotty, Bones—you'll come with us. Life-support belts, of course. Lieutenant Uhura, you're in command. Sulu, have the transporter room stand by."

"Yes, sir," Sulu replied as he moved to notify the transporter chief. The four officers were already heading for the elevator.

"Captain," said Spock, "may I inquire as to your reasons for boarding the alien?"

"Nothing extraordinary, Mr. Spock. We have the time. Curiosity. Plain old ordinary human curiosity."

"That is what I thought. However, if that expression of exclusivity is intended for my benefit, Captain, you ought to know by now that it's misplaced."

"Why, Spock!" McCoy exclaimed, rising to the challenge, "don't tell me that you're subject to an emotion like curiosity!"

"Your evaluation of the phenomenon is typically inaccurate, Doctor. Curiosity is a natural, logical function of the higher mind—not one of the baser emotions."

"That all depends on how you choose to interpret it," McCoy countered. "Now . . ."

The argument was continuing full force as they entered the transporter room. Transporter Chief Kyle was at the console, waiting for them. The console itself emitted a barely audible hum, an indication that it was prepared and ready to perform its usual functions.

Kyle had also removed and checked four life-support belts from the nearby lockers. Kirk, Spock, McCoy, and Scott buckled them on, each double-checking his own and then throwing the activating switches. Each passed before Kyle's console for a last, mechanical check. Kyle's voice read out the results.

"Captain . . . check. Commander Spock . . . check. Lt. Commander Scott . . . okay. Lt. Commander McCoy . . . check." He looked up. "All belts operational, Captain."

"Thank you, Mr. Kyle."

"If you'll take your places, sirs . . ." A lime-yellow aura now surrounded each man—a comforting, vital field put out by the life-support belts. They stepped up into the transporter alcove and took their places on four separate transporter disks.

"Ready, Captain," warned Kyle.

"Ready, Chief," Kirk replied, then grinned. "Try not to materialize us inside any solid objects, hmmm?"

Kyle essayed a slight grin at the old joke. Safety overrides on all transporters made such occurrences quite impossible.

"Energize, Chief," instructed Kirk.

Kyle carefully brought the necessary levers up, keeping a watchful eye on the vast array of monitoring instrumentation. A familiar, part-musical, tinkling hum filled the transporter room as the alcove was energized. The bodies of the four men slowly diffused, as if seen through squinted eyes in early morning . . . until they became four cylinders of multicolored particles glowing on the platforms.

Kyle hit a switch, drew the four levers rapidly down.

He was alone in the transporter room.

Four pillars of speckled fire appeared on the cold surface of the largest pod of the alien starship. The pillars faded quickly, to be replaced by the frighteningly fragile figures of three humans and a Vulcan. Each stood bathed in soft lime-yellow light.

Spock was the first to survey their harsh surroundings. They were standing next to one of the huge, dark, hexagonal ports. Just beyond the port, was an enormous, gaping hole, a black pit fringed with torn, twisted metal clawing at empty space. Clear indication that whatever cataclysm had ruptured the skin of the pod had come from within.

As soon as everyone had recovered fully from the effects of transporter dislocation, they began to move toward the forced opening. All paused briefly by the dark port. Spock ran the thin force-field of the life-support system under his heel over the black, glassy surface.

"The six-sided shape of the port suggests a similarity to the natural designs of certain terran insects. The honeycombs of bees, for example, where the individual bee cells possess a similar shape. Such a similarity is, naturally, purely superficial. To read any possibilities into it would be unreasonable."

Kirk knelt and tried to peer through the thick glass—which wasn't necessarily glass, or thick. In any case, it was like staring at an onyx mirror. If anything remained inside the pod, they'd never get a look at it this way.

Engineer Scott was standing near one of the torn flanges of metal, running his hands over it. He had his face so close to it that the force-field over his nose was nearly touching.

"Would ye look at this, now!" he whistled in surprise. His lifebelt radio carried the eerie disembodied sound to his companions.

"What is it, Scotty?" Kirk rose and moved toward him from the unrevealing port.

"It's this metal, sir. I don't know much about terran insects, but I do know metal. This stuff wasn't cast or rolled or

flextruded. And it's got a faint but definite *grain*, like fine grains in good wood." He looked disbelievingly at Kirk.

"I'm willin' to bet, sir, that this metal was made by being drawn out into long, very thin filaments and then formed into required shapes. There's layer on layer on layer of 'em right here in this one small section. Like laminating in plastics, only on a much finer scale." He tapped the metal silently.

"The way a spider spins its web," Kirk mused.

"If you will, sir," continued Scott. "Such a method of metal formin'—even with our own alloys—would make for material far stronger than anything known."

Spock had his phaser out. The brilliant beam of the tiny weapon lanced across space and sliced free a small segment of the metal. Spock caught the sample before momentum imparted by the phaser could shove it away, examined it closely.

"Lighter and stronger than anything we have now," he whispered, echoing an earlier reading. Then he looked in turn at McCoy, Scott, Kirk. "If this can be analyzed, Captain—"

"And duplicated," Scott added.

"I know, I know," Kirk admitted. He didn't want to put a damper on their enthusiasm—he felt pretty much the same—but they were in no position to get carried away by *any* discovery.

"Providing, however, that we're not trapped here ourselves, for some other unfortunate starship crew to stumble across a hundred million years from now."

Stepping back along the graceful metal beam that emerged from this section of the torn pod, he moved to get a better view of the rest of the alien vessel. Staring upwards he scanned the fronds of the metal jungle, eyed the other shredded and shattered pod-shapes.

Nearby, one thin soaring arch, as delicate as the finest sample of the wood-carver's art, dangled crookedly, distorted by unimaginable stresses in the far-distant past.

"Look," he instructed the others. "Every pod—every one. Notice any similarity?"

For a change, McCoy was the first to reply.

"They've *all* been burst open, Jim. Funny—there doesn't seem to be an intact one on the entire ship. Maybe on the other side, but . . ."

"Aye," acknowledged Scott, "and all from the inside, too. But we already saw that."

"Must have been some accident," the doctor added, "to get every pod."

Spock replied without looking, choosing instead to speak while studying the ruins of the ship.

"Accidents seldom operate according to a system, Dr. McCoy. The destruction here is too regular, too obviously managed for 'accident' to be given as cause. No, I believe we must give serious consideration to the alternative possibility that the crew of this vessel voluntarily destroyed her—and, incidentally, perhaps, themselves."

Leave it to Spock, thought Kirk, to voice what all of them were thinking but none could say.

They stood there—four insignificant animate forms, on the skin of a starship tens of millions of years in advance of anything their own civilization could produce—and considered what threat might be serious enough to prompt her crew to suicide.

Dwelling on morbidity brought no answers. Kirk started off toward the beckoning black cave and the others followed, striding with the aid of belt-gravity across the smooth hull. Without breaking stride he brought out his communicator, flipped the cover back.

"Kirk to *Enterprise*."

"*Enterprise*," came the prompt reply. Kirk was gratified. That gal would make a fine captain someday. "Uhura speaking."

"Lieutenant, are you still receiving radio emissions from this vessel?"

"When did you develop telepathy, Captain?" came the startled reply. "I was about to call down when you checked in. It ceased broadcasting the moment you stepped aboard."

Kirk considered this.

"Whatever machinery is still somehow operating on board this craft, Captain," theorized Spock, "is also sensitive." Kirk

nodded agreement, spoke into the communicator again.

"Thank you, Uhura. Inform Chief Kyle to lock on with the transporter and be ready to yank us out of here on a second's notice."

There was a pause while Uhura relayed the necessary information.

"Expecting trouble, sir?"

"No, Lieutenant. But we're going to try and enter the ship. There may be surprises other than finicky radio transmissions, something of a less indifferent nature."

Another pause, and then a second voice came over the compact speaker.

"Kyle here. Don't worry, Captain, I've got all four of you right on frequency. And I'm not budging from this console until you're all back on board."

Kirk smiled, closed the communicator.

"Sounds like the chief," smiled McCoy. Another few steps had brought them to the edge of the gaping, metal-fringed cavern.

Kirk spent a long moment examining the dim, shadowy interior. Clearly nothing was alive here. He swung lightly over the edge. Scott followed. McCoy stepped aside and gestured inward.

"After you, Spock."

"Why, Doctor, don't tell me that you, a man of science, are afraid of the dark?"

"Very funny, Spock—say, that wasn't intended to be—no, that's impossible. Vulcans don't joke."

"Joke, Doctor?" Spock's expression was unreadable.

"Oh, well," McCoy sighed. "Hope springs eternal." He followed the science officer into the abyss.

They moved slowly, carefully down the wide passageway. If necessary, the glow of their life-support belts would have been sufficient to see one another by. As it developed, that glow wasn't needed.

Faint light issued from long panels of translucent, polyethylenelike material inlaid in the walls of the airlock—for such it clearly was. Or had once been. Both air and at least

the outer lock had long since departed—the air by natural forces, the lock by apparently unnatural ones.

Spock studied one of the luminescent panels. He couldn't see a tube, a bulb, or a strip beneath it. The light seemed to come from the plastic material itself, but he couldn't be sure.

"Something in the ship is still, somehow, generating power that our sensors were unable to record, Captain. Or else there are other devices that somehow generate their own power—as these light panels seem to do."

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, Spock. It's a damnsight easier than moving with only belt-light to see by."

They continued deeper into the tunnel. Eventually they came up short against what appeared to be a solid wall of metal. It blocked further passage very thoroughly. Initial inspection produced nothing but disappointment.

It was Scott, who first noticed the slightly brighter stream of light up near the "ceiling." Sure enough, the metal there was bent. Some titanic force had wrenched at the very structure of this inner lock.

"Some kind of emergency shutoff seems to have been in action here," Scott guessed. "Energy was operating on a tremendous scale. It would have had to be, to bend this alloy like that." He nodded up at the revealing gap.

"This passage is big enough for one of the *Enterprise*'s shuttlecraft to fit in."

Kirk put out a hand and touched the dull metal. He couldn't feel it, of course—the force-field blocked the sense of touch—which was just as well, since the metal was as cold as open space. His hand would have frozen to it.

He knew the door was solid because something halted the progress of his palm. The gesture was more hopeful than anticipatory. As expected, nothing happened when he shoved. The enormous lock didn't budge.

"Let's try up near where the top buckled," he suggested. "If it's only jammed and not really locked, we might be able to jar it loose."

He and Scott took out their hand phasers. Two beams of incandescence began to play about the top of the lock.

Two minutes of concentrated beaming, however, produced nothing more than a slight red glow in the affected area.

"Useless," he murmured, watching the red glow fade along With all hopes of entering the ship.

"Captain."

The two men put their phasers away.

"What is it, Mr. Spock?" Kirk squinted. Spock was off on the other side of the passageway.

"I believe I may have had some luck, Captain."

"I hope so, Spock. We haven't. We may have to bring the *Enterprise*'s main phasers to bear in here. I'd hate to do that. Either we'll surely damage whatever's inside—the main batteries aren't as delicate as Bones' cutters—or else we won't be able to cut through at all."

They moved over to where Spock was waiting. He said nothing, only pointed upward.

About three meters off the floor was a large square panel, recessed into the wall of the tunnel. Three hexagonal-shaped plastic plates were set into the recess.

"I think, Captain, that that may be a key. Probability would suggest some form of manual backup system to operate any airlock."

"I agree, Spock." Kirk studied the panel, made an experimental jump. "There's only one problem—artificial gravity seems to be in full operation here. For the moment, our key is out of reach. Someone can beam back aboard and bring back a . . ."

"I do not believe that will be necessary, Captain." Spock moved to the curving wall and braced himself against the metal. "If you will climb onto my shoulders, you should be able to reach the panel."

"Isn't science wonderful?" murmured McCoy.

It took Kirk, a trained gymnast and tumbler, only a second or two. Then he was securely braced on the Vulcan's shoulders. Even so, the recessed panel was still over his head. But by straining his arm he could manage to reach all three hexagonal plates.

"I always said you were a supportive influence, Spock," ventured McCoy.

"And I've always felt your humor was in execrable taste, Doctor." Spock's voice barely hinted at the strain of keeping Kirk's weight on his shoulders. "However I feel that in all honesty I must revise my opinion of your puns."

"Well, it's about time! I always knew you'd come around, Spock."

"They are," the science officer continued, "not merely bad. They are atrocious." McCoy's expression fell.

Kirk pressed firmly on the nearest plastic hexagon. It sank inward under his fingers, but nothing else happened. Trying the one to its left produced a similar lack of results. When he hit the third panel, however, the plastic suddenly pulsed with a soft green glow.

The brilliant reaction from something three hundred million years "dead" was startling—so much so that Kirk nearly fell.

"Careful, Captain," Spock admonished, tightening his grip on Kirk's legs. "I can support you like this for a long time, but if you insist on shifting your weight, well, I'm not an acrobat."

"Don't worry, Mr. Spock. I'm the one who'll end up falling. I don't plan to, not even in this light gravity." He kept his hand on the depressed disk and was rewarded with a faint but massive grinding sound.

"It's movin', Captain!" shouted Scott.

Sure enough, there'd been a slight hint of motion from the massive lock door. And the space near its top admitting light from somewhere within had grown a little wider. But the grinding stopped immediately and the green light faded from the disk.

"Try again, Captain," Spock suggested. Kirk pressed the disk once more. The glow returned. So did the grinding noise. He kept the disk forced down, trying to watch the lock door at the same time.

He heard a deep and echoing ripping sound, as of ancient joints and bolts giving way. The massive door shuddered, started to swing wide on unseen hinges . . . then stopped. This time not all Kirk's jabs on the disk could move it.

But there was a gap between door and tunnel wall now wide enough for a man to slip through.

"That's good enough, Spock! Coming down." He jumped carefully clear of his second's shoulders and moved to the new opening.

They had seen nothing so far to indicate that any excessive caution was required. Nonetheless, Kirk stepped softly as he edged through the gap. Spock followed, with Scott and McCoy bringing up the rear. The captain's last real fear was eliminated when they were all inside and the gigantic lock door failed to slam shut behind them.

The interior of the chamber in which they now found themselves was built on an enormous, inhuman scale. The walls were the color of pale chalcedony, dull and waxlike whites and blues. They curved upward and outward, forming a room vaguely hexagonal in pattern. Apparently the six-sided format was repeated throughout the interior of the vessel as well as in the construction of the superstructure.

The walls and sections of floor were lined with shattered, smashed machines of unknown, indefinable purpose. It was unlikely their purposes would ever be divined. Even the smallest device partook of the same feathery, lacelike design as the great ship itself. It was almost as though the builders had selected the internal structure of a leaf as their pattern for interstellar craft.

Some shapes—more solid, less ethereal of form—were still intact. And still operating . . . or at least dormant. They pulsed with different shades and blends of the visible spectrum. Violet and umber, emerald green and deep maroon and a light, pastel pink—each seemingly too beautiful to be functional.

The men moved toward the center of the room, where a monstrous amorphous shape squatted like a jeweled toad. From its top, graceful appendages radiated roofward in all directions—wands of flexible crystal. The four men moved closer.

As they advanced, the crystalline strands began to move. Slowly, gently, swaying to the ebb of some unseen tide. As the strands moved they were accompanied by a strangely melodic, somehow nocturnal music.

McCoy murmured, "I heard something like that, once. Not exactly the same, but close. Ever hear electric cello, Jim?"

"Close, close," Kirk agreed. "I wouldn't swear to any similarity, though. You know me, Bones, I'm more partial to classical stuff."

They stopped next to the enigmatic structure. When they halted, the floating fronds also stilled, the haunting music fading out in a last, trilling pianissimo.

"What do you make of it, Spock?" Kirk asked. As he spoke, the translucent limbs fluttered slightly and invisible fingers ran ever so lightly over a faraway harp.

"Look here, Captain," interrupted Scott before Spock could answer. He was pointing to the upper surface of the stocky construction.

A thin, sparkling band of pink light had suddenly appeared around the upper trunk of the main body. Spock made a quick reading with his tricorder.

"Captain, it's registering energy output. Quite weak, but definite."

"Still functioning, then," mused Kirk softly, "after all these millennia. The lock door I can understand—it *would* operate off any oddball, emergency power source. But this thing?"

Spock was circling the object, constantly consulting his tricorder. He was shaking his head as he rejoined them.

"I am still getting tricorder readings, Captain." When he spoke there was music and movement in the room again. "I would hazard an opinion that those strange appendages are accumulators, receptors that pick up any faint form of kinetic energy—motion, movement in the air from sound waves . . . our voices . . . anything."

"It absorbs this energy and metamorphoses it, returning it or 'playing it back' in at least two readily observable ways. As motion in its 'arms' and as music . . . if those sounds are indeed an alien conception of music."

"Yes, but what is its function?" Kirk pressed, staring at the wands. They threw his words back at him and added a lithe tune.

"As to that, Captain, your guess is as good as mine. This could be anything," and he gestured at the shape, "from an

energy-acceptance station for the starship's engines to a recreation area for her crew. We do not have enough information to deduce."

"It gives me the creeps," announced McCoy firmly. It wasn't a flip evaluation, either. "I feel like something that ought to be dead is watching us." Scott looked equally uneasy all of a sudden. Machines were his province. He knew them better than most people, but this thing—

"Aye, Captain, I feel it, too."

"A standard physiological symptom of latent primal superstition." Spock said. "The fear of primitive peoples confronting something utterly incomprehensible to them."

Kirk was studying the rest of the silent chamber. He spoke idly.

"Compared to the beings that built this craft, we are primitive peoples. You too, Mr. Spock."

"I did not mean to imply otherwise, Captain. Merely to attempt an evaluation of—"

"All right, all right, never mind, Spock. Let's keep moving."

He pointed to the far side of the chamber where another door waited.

III

Whereas the inner airlock door had been a single massive plate of unadorned metal, this portal was both more elaborately designed and more formal-looking. It was decorative as well as practical. The flat surface was seamed by triple lines, forming three triangles, each engraved deeply with alien words and cryptography. To the men of the *Enterprise* they were so many scratches.

Spock located another recess with its three inserted hexagonal disks.

But when he depressed them, nothing happened. All four stared at the seemingly impenetrable barrier for a while.

"Of course!" blurted Scott suddenly, as the others turned. "The other door was bent, damaged, so only one disk was enough to operate it. Or maybe the circuitry was jammed together. But three triangles—three disks. Press them all at the same time, Mr. Spock."

"Quite so, Mr. Scott," concurred Spock, sharing in the chief engineer's revelation.

His hand was not quite wide enough to cover all three disks, but both hands managed the trick neatly. This feat gave them some idea of the size of the starship's crew members, or of their manipulative digits, anyway. Spock pressed in.

The three disks glowed green. Seconds later the three sections of door slid back silently, disappearing into walls, roof, and floor. Another huge chamber opened beyond.

The interior of the pod was circular in design, with huge rooms spaced around a common core, and they were walking around it. This particular chamber was lined with a long row of the dark, hexagonal ports they'd seen from outside. Whether it was from starlight they admitted or the presence of more of the ubiquitous plastic strips, the light here was much brighter.

"No, Captain," mused Spock as they discussed the continuing puzzle of the strange illumination. "I think the light

has been on in here all the time."

"Why couldn't we see in through the ports, then, from out—Oh, of course." Kirk answered his own question. "One-way ports, to protect the observer from external light and other radiation sources."

They moved deeper into the long, curving chamber. One interior wall was dominated by a huge reflective shape. It resembled a giant convex mirror and was also six-sided in form, though greatly stretched-out. Objects with even stranger patterns—weird instrumentation and peculiar machinery—lined all the visible walls and dominated rank on rank of high, slanted consoles.

There was something else unusual, more unusual than any individual piece of apparatus.

The destruction that had blasted the rest of the starship, including the room they'd just left, was not in evidence. Whatever catastrophe had torn the great vessel asunder had passed over this room.

As they moved further into the chamber and close to specific instruments, lights began to appear, glowing, emanating from scattered dials and panels and hidden strips of plastic.

"Proximity activation," noted Scott absently. "Huh-oh . . . look there." They stopped, turned.

The gigantic mirror, which was doubtless anything but so simple a device, began to exhibit a milky opalescence. Colors commenced to flow and drift and blend across its surface. A moment later there was more music. But this was quite different from the sounds produced by the octopoidal machine in the other chamber. They were more rhythmic, insistent and yet soothing.

They moved toward it, curious. Spock began to adjust his tricorder, preparatory to taking some preliminary readings.

"A most intriguing phenome . . ."

The gentle light on the clustered console to Kirk's right abruptly exploded in brilliant green. A lurid, blinding emerald flare bathed them all. Formerly stolid, calm music changed suddenly to an enraged percussive clamoring. An enormous outpouring of emotion that even over three hundred million

years and unfathomable differences in shape and physiology still sounded unmistakably like an alarm.

Behind them the three segments of the tripartite portal slammed silently shut. McCoy took a couple of steps toward it, slowed, stopped when he realized the futility of the gesture.

The light dimmed; the music ceased.

They were trapped in the cyclopean cave.

There were the three familiar disks set in a familiar recess to the left of the doorway. McCoy sauntered over slowly and depressed the three plastic plates. Lightly at first, then with all his strength. Then he tried them in various combinations. All attempts produced equal results—none at all. The door remained resolutely closed, as obstinate as the dead star circling below them. Not even the faint light appeared from within the disks.

Various imprecations and comments on the dubious parentage of the door's designers also failed to have a salutary effect.

"Somehow I didn't think it would work, Bones." Kirk smiled grimly. "Analysis, Mr. Spock?"

Spock consulted the all-purpose tricorder once more, wishing instead for the mythical terran supercomputer JWG. Wishing was not logical, but under the circumstances, he permitted himself the tiny private deviation. The tricorder singularly uninformative.

"Nothing available on whatever activated the door mechanism, Captain. But an atmosphere has been supplied now." He sounded surprised. "It approaches Earth-normal. Shall we deactivate life-support belts? We may be here for a while and this gives us an opportunity to conserve the power supply since we can't return to the *Enterprise* for recharging."

Kirk hesitated. Force-fields could be more of a problem than a benefit at the damndest times, but . . .

"No, Spock. This is just a bit too neat, too easy. That door could open again as fast as it closed. Whatever established an atmosphere in here might not have had the foresight to do the same in the other room. No, we'll keep our life-support systems on." He flipped open his communicator, eyed the now ominous walls uncertainly.

"*Enterprise*, do you read me? Mr. Sulu?" He paused, tried again. "Lieutenant Uhura, acknowledge. This is the captain speaking."

A faint, rhythmic humming was the only sound the speaker in the compact unit produced—a normal blank receptor wave. That proved the communicator was operating.

"No use, Captain," said Spock, still working with the tricorder. "Some sort of blanket interference has been set up. Its efficiency approaches totality." He looked up from the 'corder.

"I do not like this at all, Captain."

McCoy had ambled back to rejoin them.

"You always did have this marvelous ability for understatement, Spock. A gigantic alien zombie could come crashing through the near wall, spewing fire and dripping venom from poisonous fangs, and you'd sum the situation up by declaring that its intentions were other than benign!"

Kirk noticed that Scott had his phaser out. "What are you going to do with that, Scotty? We can't cut our way out any more than we could cut our way in."

"No, sir," the engineer admitted. "Not exactly."

"You've got an idea, Scotty. Don't keep us guessing."

"Well, sir, these walls are tough, I'll give you that." He gestured towards the trisected door with the phaser. "But those control disks don't look like they're made of anythin' near as strong a material. If I can burn through the covering plates and short the controls—assumin' they're shortable—there's no reason why the door shouldn't release."

"It's a good thought, Scotty," Kirk confessed. "I don't like being destructive, but . . . Give it a try."

Scott walked over and eyed the recessed disks briefly. He lined up the phaser on the lowest one, carefully set the power level, and pressed the trigger.

Nothing happened.

He tried again, turning up the power all the way. This time he produced a very faint red glow which quickly faded and disappeared.

At a sudden thought Kirk pulled out his communicator again. This time he didn't try to activate it. Instead, he turned it over and checked the power telltale set in the base.

"No energy rating. Something's drained them. Blanket interference my eye! Something's at work in here that drinks energy like a sponge." His eyes darted around the innocent-seeming chamber, saw—as expected—nothing.

"And whatever it is, it's selective. These panels and dials are still glowing, still activated. I'm surprised this even picked up a carrier wave, before."

McCoy had his own comm unit out, checked it and then repeated the check with his phaser.

"Mine too, Jim."

"And mine," Spock added. "But not the tricorder." He made his own survey of the silent room. "Odd."

"So we're stuck," said McCoy unsubtly. "No communications and no weapons . . . no way of telling Kyle to pull us out of this." He jammed the useless instruments back in his belt.

"Only for the moment, Bones. Things are happening awfully fast here. They might happen in our favor any moment. We'd better be ready to take advantage of them if we get a chance. You miss a lot mooning over current disappointments. For example, notice anything new?"

They all searched the chamber. Creamy opalescence still washed across the face of the convex mirror. Lights still flickered and stuttered from different instruments.

"I see. Everything's returned to normal." McCoy studied the mirror. "Or at least, what was passing for normal when we came in." He paused a moment, listening. "Even the music's back—if that's what it is."

Kirk noticed the large, hexagonal dais in the center of the room. They had just been passing it when everything had gone crazy. Now, staring at it intently for the first time, he kicked himself mentally for not noticing the similarity before. Despite its size and shape it bore an unmistakable, if faint, resemblance to another smaller, more familiar object . . . his own command chair.

Recessed knobs, oddly curled levers, and triple-disk controls lined the slanted face of consoles inside the "chair," along with

a vast array of multicolored, winking dials and band indicators. There were markings over the transparent dials and plates that might have been instructions, directions. Whatever secrets they held were locked up in a long-extinct alphabet and mathematical system.

"Control and navigation instrumentation, maybe," he mused. He turned to scan the room, suddenly seeing it in a new light.

"I'll bet this was the ship's bridge." He touched the peculiarly formed seat. "The captain must have sat here, in this same chair—eons ago." He stood on tiptoes and let himself down gently into the seat. Whatever the nature of his long-dead alien counterpart, one thing was certain, their backsides had differing configurations.

Spock was fiddling with the tricorder as he circled the command chair.

"I don't think so, Captain. The source of the interference is here, somewhere. Also, various aspects of construction taken together with certain readings lead me to believe that this was not a part of the vessel's original equipment. It seems much more like something that was made up for a special occasion—'jury-rigged' I think you call it. To handle an emergency, for example.

"One thing is certain . . . it's generating all kinds of energy patterns. I suspect that the signal which activated the door came from here, too."

"Sure some sort of automatics were designed to seal off this room," agreed Scott, suddenly uneasy. "But seal it off from what?"

"Not from us, obviously," added McCoy.

"This ship, despite its size and probable power," Spock continued, "has been all but totally destroyed. Even the last chamber we were in. But this room, these instruments, this console—especially this console—they remain intact.

"Something, gentlemen, once came aboard this ship. Something formidable enough to not only destroy it here, but enough to cause her crew to commit suicide . . . yet leave this one last room intact. As a precaution, I should think."

"But the door closed when we entered here," protested Scott. "Surely we didn . . ." He stopped and his mouth gaped. "Oh, come on now, Spock! No known form of life could survive three hundred million years of exposure to naked space!"

"Quite right, Mr. Scott," agreed Spock grimly. "No known form of life.

McCoy interrupted them all.

"Jim, Spock, Scotty . . . the door . . .!" They whirled as one.

In the center of the still tightly closed portal, lines of glowing emerald energy, shading occasionally to aquamarine, now to deep olive, were playing freely across the metal surface.

"No," McCoy whispered, taking a step backwards.

Spock studied tricorder readings and spoke without emotion.

"Something is trying to get in here, Captain. The interference energy put out and directed by this console is reacting with another outside energy source of unknown proportions and capabilities. The flux that is the result of this interaction is now visible on the surface of the door."

"Will it hold?" Kirk asked. Spock nodded slowly.

"If the energy involved holds at present levels and does not increase."

Kirk studied the door. It was hard to turn away from that threatening, shockingly silent conflict of energies. But he forced himself to, to look down and study the alien controls. Somewhere in the maze of dials and switches designed for digits other than fingers there had to be a clue to what was happening. Something, anything at all, to give them a hint of what they might be up against.

On a hunch and with a lack of any real information to proceed on (not a very promising base) he began pressing in disks, moving switches as best he could with clumsy hands. For a while nothing happened. Then, when he accidentally nudged a spiral-shaped knob, the lights in the console began to intensify. Spock murmured something, and Kirk glanced up at his science officer.

"The mirror-thing, Captain." Kirk turned so that he could see the huge, hexagonal reflector.

It was beginning to pulse softly. The rippling waves of diffuse color started to flow more rapidly across its shifting surface. The mirror shuddered, turned to face them on some kind of hidden swivel mounting.

For a moment the four of them were reflected in the gleaming, curved material, enlarged and grotesquely distorted.

"What is it, Jim?" McCoy demanded. "What's it doing?"

"I don't know, Bones." Kirk tried to watch the mirror and handle the console at the same time. Something had activated the mirror this far. Very well. His hands played over controls as yet untouched. After a few moments the colors started to fade, the mirror itself to brighten.

Then the chaotic display of color solidified, coalesced into blurred images fluttering across the screen. That's what it was, a screen! And sound emanated from it now, too . . . a husky chittering like the song of a gigantic cricket. But the sound was much more varied, much richer in invention. Somewhere behind those sounds there was a guiding intelligence.

A picture began to form in the mirror-screen. The image sharpened. In the background was a control room of some sort. A familiar control room.

The control room they were in now.

More interesting still was the creature that dominated the screen. It was insectlike but not ugly. Its surface features were smooth, streamlined—not spiky, boney, or sharp. It was difficult to get an idea of its true size because of the way it dominated the mirror-screen. It must have been sitting very close to the visual pickup. But it was clear that it was much bigger than any man.

Big enough to need the two huge doorways they'd encountered thus far. Big enough to make use of a ship this size. Big enough so that each pod might be quarters for a single crew member.

Not big enough to prevent its destruction.

Now they could match up the strange sounds coming from speakers behind the screen with the being's mouth movements. There was a definite tone of urgency in its peculiar, rasping words. It seemed—though it was hard to tell due to vast differences in voice-box construction—that some of its message was being repeated, over and over.

Kirk finally broke the silence that had settled over the little group. The creature on the screen didn't react to the sound of his voice. If there was any lingering doubt about that, there was none now. They were watching a recorded message, and none cared to think how old it might be.

"Could be the ship's log," he thought out loud. "Or a warning. Or a religious service, or instructions for game playing, or music lessons."

"I think not, Captain," said Spock. "This preparation and care hints at more than mere frivolity."

"True . . . there, there's that same collection of sounds again!" Kirk insisted. "It's repeating itself, all right—at least part of the time."

McCoy murmured, "A message from three million centuries ago."

"It is possible, it seems," nodded Spock. "That much of their amazing technology has survived." He was working with the tricorder again.

Kirk divided his attention between his busy science officer and the strange alien on the mirror-screen.

"Can you get anything out of this, Spock?"

"I may be able to affect a translation," he replied. "The basic voice pattern does not exhibit any impossible aural characteristics. Perhaps we are deceived as to its potential complexity by sheer age."

A sudden change seemed to come over the voice of the ancient speaker. His speech was louder now, more insistent. McCoy glanced back at the triple door. Scott followed the doctor's glance with a worried one of his own.

The green and light-blue bands of energy sparking across its surface were thicker, less intermittent than before. Whatever was at work on the incredibly tough alloy was definitely working its way through.

"Hurry up, Spock."

"Patience, Doctor." He activated some switches on the tricorder. Leaving the compact instrument, he started to scan the console, examining switches and dials.

Eventually he seemed to find what he was looking for. He removed the tricorder from his shoulder and placed it carefully on the panel, setting it on top of a small six-sided grid set into the metal. A last switch depressed on the tricorder and then he stepped back, turning to watch the screen.

Instantly, the voice of the alien started coming from the tricorder speaker instead of from the mirror-screen. The chittering sounds began to seem less garbled, more comprehensible. Blank spaces in the speech replaced chitters, where the tricorder's marvelous abilities were unable to translate delicacies of alien syntax.

"Danger . . . (more chittering sounds) . . . star . . . drawn to it . . ."

Spock reached up and made some final, fine adjustments to the 'corder. The voice was suddenly clear and understandable in the huge chamber.

". . . Rather than carry this malevolent life form to other worlds," came the voice from across time, "we have decided to destroy our own ship. The Thing had been trapped here by the tremendous gravity-well of the dead sun. So it must remain. So, sadly, must we. We have studied the problem quite thoroughly in the time remaining. There is no other solution."

Kirk desperately wished he could read the expressions on the face of the speaker.

"The others are dead. Only I am left, to give warning. If you are understanding this message, comprehend that you are protected in this room only for the moment. The Thing . . . grows ever stronger . . . it wants . . ."

A spectacular flare of green phosphorescence erupted from the region of the doorway. The voice of the speaking alien was drowned out by a violent, hysterical flow of pure energy. Then the three segments of the door exploded inward as though struck by a small meteor.

The shock threw Dr. McCoy and Scott off the dais. Kirk and Spock were knocked down, but managed to hold onto the control chair and console. Fortunately, the splinters of flying metal from the ruined door somehow missed everyone.

The great curved mirror-screen began to vibrate, shiver as tremendous unrestrained power was played through it. A wash of stunning olivine boomed across the surface, absorbing the milky opalescence, drowning out all other colors. There was a deep rumbling.

The polished surface started to quiver at fantastic speed, then to flow. A crackling sound followed, then another, and another as shards of mirror material broke free, fell from the screen to the floor. Another powerful explosion tore the remainder of the wonderful device into tiny pieces of shining metal and blew a deep hole in the structure of the interior pod wall.

Clinging desperately to the unsteady, rocking console, Kirk and Spock watched as even the smallest fragment of mirror-screen was enveloped in soft green light. Each bit was then melted into a tiny, shapeless blob of hot metal.

At that point the command chair and console began to glow faintly green. Spock noticed it just in time.

"Off, Captain!"

Kirk was already jumping clear. Seconds later the temporary control center began to glow white-hot beneath enveloping green mists, then to run and drip like hot butter.

All around the great chamber, the other previously untouched mechanisms and devices started to show the now deadly green fire.

Kirk had a supportive arm around a dazed but otherwise unhurt Scott. Spock aided McCoy, who likewise had only been stunned.

"Out of here!" Kirk shouted into space. "Hurry!" Several pseudopods of translucent green started to advance towards them from various melting panels.

The men froze. Glaring light played suddenly over their forms. They dissolved, became four small shapeless masses of colored particles.

". . . Located them right after you pinned down the area of that last explosion, Mr. Sulu," said Transporter Chief Kyle into the intercom. His hands were smoothly operating the transporter controls as he spoke.

"Locked on and beaming them aboard," he finished.

"Good work, Chief." Uhura's voice echoed back over the grid from the distant bridge. "I thought we'd lost them when we were first cut off. And then when the pod they entered started to blow . . ."

Kyle looked up into the transporter alcove, saw flashing pillars beginning to take on solid, familiar outlines.

"Piece of cake, ma'm. They're coming through now."

The gleaming cylinders continued to build and take bipedal form. Kyle studied his dials and indicators intently, moved the levers down the final notch.

Kirk was in the foremost transporter disk. He blinked, took in the transporter room at a glance, and grinned in relief at Kyle. His expression changed fast when he noticed the chief's face. Kyle wore the strangest expression, of shock, perhaps. He was staring and pointing at Kirk—no, not at him, behind him.

"Chief," he began, "what's the—"

"Captain!" Kyle finally managed to gasp out, gesturing. "Something beamed aboard with you!" Kirk whirled, looked behind him. So did Spock and Scott and McCoy.

The fifth disk was occupied . . . by a glowing and pulsing shapeless green mass.

"Transport it back out!" In an instant Kirk was dashing for the transporter console where the chief stood frozen. He dove for the activating switch. He'd think about saving Spock and McCoy and Scott later.

Too late.

The entire transporter room was suddenly drenched in light the color of deep rain forests, in diffused energy that tingled and sent waves of terror over every man present. Then the walls seemed to suck up the light like a sponge.

Kirk recovered, his hand precious centimeters short of the activating lever. Might as well have been parsecs. Standing slowly he looked around and saw that Spock and the others

were staring at the walls. Then he noticed it also. The walls of the transporter chamber were now radiating a faint, greenish glow.

At the same instant a roar of sound burst from the ship's speakers. A bizarre, untranslatable, somehow triumphant cry. It was repeated, once.

In space, the *Enterprise*—infinitely tiny compared to the giant alien starship—suddenly flared with a halo of pale green. Then the seething mist thinned as the ship's hull seemed to reabsorb the color into itself.

Kirk let out his breath slowly, trying to regularize his metabolism.

"Mr. Scott, are you all right?" The engineer was staring blankly at the no longer friendly walls. His gaze held hints of panic.

"MR. SCOTT!"

The engineer shook at the verbal blast, but it was what was needed. He drew himself up, holding his right shoulder with his free arm.

"Yes, Captain. This is just a bruise. But what . . .?"

"Bones?"

McCoy rose slowly from his kneeling position on the platform, brushed at his lower back and grimaced, then nodded.

"I'll be all right, Jim."

Two unrelenting forces flowed through the *Enterprise* then. A green something that had lived at least three hundred million years ago now permeated the entire ship, and a holocaust of thought racing through the mind of her captain, who had lived somewhat less.

IV

Kirk, Spock, and Scott moved toward the bridge. Despite his continuing curiosity, McCoy had left them at another level. His job was elsewhere now.

To their credit, the crew on the bridge had remained reasonably calm. Less highly trained personnel might have done something drastic. The three returning officers took up their regular stations. A glance served to pass command back from Uhura to Kirk. They had no time to waste on formalities.

Reports were starting to filter onto the bridge from the rest of the ship as different sections responded to Kirk's request for status reports. His initial nervousness relaxed, but did not disappear, as section after section reported neither damage nor loss of life—no harm done by the strange discharge of green energy.

Or whatever it was.

He sighed as Uhura relayed the report he most wanted to hear.

"Sick Bay reports, sir. Dr. McCoy on alert—no injuries."

"No damage to engines or hull structure, Captain," came Scott's report a moment later.

So the *Enterprise* was still healthy, organically and inorganically. That was something, at least. They'd been given some time.

But how much?

"Automatic bridge defense system activated and operating, Captain." This from Spock.

Kirk spared an idle checking glance up and behind. A small metal globe, looking rather like a child's toy ball studded with tiny pipes now protruded downward from a small hatch in the ceiling. A tiny red light on its side winked on, showing that the automatic phaser mechanism was powered up and ready to deal with any intruder.

Kirk had seen the last-gasp defenses of the enormous alien ship fail in an attempt to halt the forays of the green light. He

didn't pin much faith on the powerful phaser.

He nodded in acknowledgment and turned to study the main viewscreen. The now familiar shape of the ancient traveler, in reduced perspective, still floated against the vast blackness of dead sun, empty space. He thought a moment, then activated the chair comm unit, leaning slightly forward to project clearly.

"Uhura, give me all intership speakers. Open channel."

"Channels open, Captain."

"All sections are to remain on full alert until further notice. Section reports from Sick Bay indicate your companions are all unharmed. Engineering reports no damage to the ship. Nevertheless you will remain on full alert until told otherwise. All personnel will wear . . ." He caught himself. He'd almost said "will wear sidearms."

What would they shoot at—green light?

"All personnel will wear clothes." Sulu and Scott tried to stifle laughs, failed. McCoy would have approved. He tried to think of something brilliant to conclude with, failed as usual. "Everybody do your job . . . be ready for developments . . . and relax. Further orders and information will be forthcoming."

He switched off the communicator and found that everyone was watching him expectantly.

"So—we're in great shape, aren't we? But whatever was on that ship—" and he indicated the floating alien starship, "used our transporter beam to come aboard when it was good and ready. I don't think there's any question but that it allowed the alien's defense system to jam our communicators, the transporter, and our phasers until it was prepared to board the *Enterprise* itself."

"This in itself says that it has some limitations, Captain," suggested Spock. "If it was forced to rely on our transporter, then it seems certain it cannot move freely through space."

"That's true. We may have occasion to hope it has other limitations, Spock."

"That alien commander, sir," said Scott slowly, choosing his words with care. "At least, I assume it was the commander.

His message confirmed that they had to destroy themselves. Why?"

Kirk didn't reply. He sat and stared closely at his left foot. It was as good a subject to focus concentration on as anything else. Staring at Uhura would be more pleasant, but would have the opposite effect. Despite his concentration he was aware that everyone was still watching him, waiting. As usual, they expected him to get them out of this. It was so goddamn unfair!

Kirk's opinion was not unique in the thoughts of captains.

When he finally spoke, the words came slow but clear.

"Until we learn more about this creature, Scotty, perhaps we should be prepared to do the same." He paused, but Scott wasn't going to help him out on this one. He'd have to say the words himself.

"Take two of your men and arm the self-destruct mechanism in the engine core."

"Sir?"

"You heard, Mr. Scott. Carry out your orders."

Scott came erect, snapped off a sharp salute.

"Aye, sir!"

An interval of solemn, respectful silence followed as the chief engineer left the bridge. He could have delegated the task to his assistants, but that was not Montgomery Scott's way.

"Mr. Spock, any change in the *Enterprise*'s readings? Anything to indicate what this creature may be up to?"

"Nothing obvious or immediate, Captain. We are registering a slightly higher than normal magnetic flux. It's not dangerous—not as it reads now. However, if it should go higher . . . and the level isn't constant. It appears to be fluctuating irregularly. There is some slight pattern, some half rhythm to these pulsations, but nothing recognizable enough to . . ."

Kirk barely heard the rest. "Like the beating of a heart," he muttered, half to himself.

A light blinked on suddenly on Uhura's board. No one turned immediately to watch her. At the moment, private thoughts were of greater importance.

"Bridge here." She paused, listening. Her life-support aura formed a lemon-colored nimbus around her, contrasting sharply with the red uniform of a communications officer.

"What?" The loud exclamation brought Kirk around. "Thank you, Lieutenant." She swiveled to face the Captain. Her voice was grim.

"Sir, decks five and six report shutdown of all life-support systems." An anticipatory shudder seemed to run through the bridge. "They'd just gone over to life-support belts—there was barely enough time." She paused.

"If you hadn't given the order for full alert, sir . . ." She left the obvious unsaid.

"What about manual override?" Uhura shook her head.

"According to the officers in charge, manual overrides have failed to respond, and—"

The raucous blare of the general alarm drowned out her concluding statements and all other sounds on the bridge. Kirk spoke angrily.

"Cut that, Mr. Sulu."

Flashing lights and siren died quickly. He shifted in his chair. "Mr. Spock!"

"Still checking, Captain," came the science officer's calm, reassuring tones. "Here it is—trouble in the engineering core, Captain."

"Damn. Any injuries?"

"I do not know, Captain. Apparently the alarm was sounded, but no one remained at the engineering communicator to supply answers to queries."

Kirk shook his head in disbelief. Didn't *anyone* remember his training?

"Bridge to Sick Bay," he began, speaking into the communicator he'd been pounding for the last ten minutes. "Bones, get down to Engineering Central, on the double. No, I don't know what it is, but that's where the general alarm was sounded." Another call switch down.

"Life-Support Central . . . LIFE-SUPPORT!"

"Life Support here . . . Lt. Crandall, sir."

"Get on those dead systems on decks five and six, Lieutenant. Draw any additional personnel you need from other sections, but get on them!" If the hard-pressed Crandall desired to reply, she didn't get the chance. Kirk was already heading for the elevator with Spock close behind.

The lights in the elevators ticking off the different decks seemed to pass with maddening slowness.

"What now, Spock?" he muttered tightly.

"I cannot say, Captain—but I venture to guess that the problems in engineering, as well as in life-support, are due to the conscious intervention of the creature that managed to beam aboard with us."

"Yes, of course—but what's it doing, Spock? Conscious, perhaps, but is it random or guided consciousness that's at work here? What's its purpose? Or does it have one?"

"Xenopsychology is not one of my specialties, Captain. At this stage we can only be certain that its intentions are both destructive and combative in nature—whether guided by intelligence we cannot yet say for sure, though its actions would tend to support such a hypothesis."

The light to the engineering core blinked solid green, inviting egress.

Kirk smiled sourly. "Bones was right about your facility for understatement. 'Combative!' " They stepped out.

This was the real heart of the *Enterprise*, just as the bridge was her "brain." Awesome energies worked quietly here, tremendous force was channeled, contained, kept domesticated. It was an awkward place to have trouble.

A number of engineers, technicians, and a few security personnel were clustered at the far end of the chamber. They shifted, moving wordlessly aside as Kirk and Spock approached. Dr. McCoy was already there, kneeling next to a partly opened hatchway.

The hatch leading to the maintenance tube that in turn led out to the central core was closed nearly all the way. Nearly, because chief engineer Scott was holding it open. He was pinned securely between the enormous weight of the power-activated hatch cover and the floor. It pressed against his

waist, and the lime-yellow glow of his life-support force-field flared redly at the point of contact.

Another few steps and Kirk was able to kneel next to the trapped engineer. Scott looked up at him and smiled grimly. He was in no real pain, as yet. Kirk touched the smooth metal of the hatch cover—its engaged closing mechanism now humming softly, irregularly—and felt as helpless as it was possible for a starship captain to feel.

Spock had detached himself from the group and had moved immediately to the nearby control panel. Now he was conferring intently with the assistant engineer in charge. The assistant was a thin young man with a wisp of blond mustache and an earnest expression. Just now he was perspiring heavily.

Meanwhile Kirk managed to dredge up a smile, somehow. It wasn't much, but Scott apparently appreciated it. He smiled back.

"How are you doing, Scotty?" Kirk finally said to break the silence.

"I'm all right, sir." Kirk reflected on how adversity made liars of all men. Scott's voice was tinged with nervousness, if not pain. "There's a good side to everything, I suppose. If the general alarm hadn't been given, I wouldn't have been wearing my life-support belt. And if the belt hadn't been activated, well—" he grinned faintly, "there'd be two of me now."

"The force-field of his belt won't hold against that kind of constant pressure for long, Jim," noted McCoy softly. Kirk, who was about to admonish McCoy for mentioning it so loudly, reflected that if anyone knew the capabilities and limitations of the belt fields, it was Scott.

"I know that, Bones." He looked over toward the control panel. "Override system, Mr. Spock. Open the core hatch."

Scott shook his head slowly.

"It's no good, Captain. The mechanism's been frozen in the close mode. We tried everything."

Spock looked over from his position at the controls.

"Engineer Scott is correct, sir. Something has jammed all circuits. Very effectively, too."

Think . . . think . . .! Kirk studied the massive hatch cover closely, sought ideas in the intermittent hum of the servomotor.

"Scotty, is there a manual device for handling this baby?"

"No, sir. Its designers never envisioned a situation where it might be necessary to move such a heavy, vital piece of machinery by hand. Security has something to do with it, too. Anyhow, the last command it received was to close. Only the computer can tell it otherwise, sir, and it's blocked, as Mr. Spock says. Nothin' mere muscles can do is goin' to force it backwards against that command."

As he finished, a desperately bright flare of red came from the place where the cover rested against his force-field and waist. He squirmed uncomfortably. The brighter flare was the belt's way of warning its wearer that they were approaching a critical point.

"Gettin' a little weak, sir," he said unnecessarily.

Kirk spun and glared at the watching engineers and technicians. "Well, what are you all mooning at? The *Enterprise* can survive without one hatch cover. We'll have to. Maybe we can jury-rig an emergency radiation shield. Get those cutter beams out, Move!"

"Yes, sir!" replied one of the mesmerized engineers. Then they all seemed to be moving at once, like an army of toy soldiers.

Kirk studied his trapped chief engineer, and Scott smiled reassuringly back at him. Which was damned odd. It ought to be the other way around, he reflected. But that was the kind of person Scott was—always worried about others first. Quiet, more reserved than Spock in some ways, less ebullient than McCoy, Kirk tried to think of some way to make small talk, but nothing that came to mind seemed in any way appropriate.

Despite the fact that starship captains were not permitted the option of being maudlin, for the moment, at least, the alien invader was completely forgotten.

Two of the engineers finally returned and began setting up a complicated arrangement of spools and spheres and silicon spirals on a flexible tripod. Kirk backed away. One of the engineers gave a ready signal. Scott bent his head down to

his chest and turned away as much as he could, covering his face with his arms. Both engineers wore thick goggles.

Kirk put his own hands over his eyes to shield himself. There was a soft click. An incredibly brilliant, seemingly solid line of violent, violet light lanced out from the tip of the heavy-duty cutter. It touched one of the thick hinges at the back of the hatch cover.

Immediately the hinge began to glow' a deep red, shading rapidly to white. A moment more and the metal began to flow like gray milk. The hissing of the melting metal was the only sound in the engineering section.

What seemed like ages later there was a dull snap, and the hinge was cut through. The engineers instantly switched off the cutter. Now pressing shut with only a single activated hinge, the hatch cover was canted at a definite awkward angle. Scott was just able to struggle free, carefully avoiding the still white-hot area where the one hinge had been melted away.

Kirk gave him a hand up. The chief was unhurt, only badly shaken.

"Be nice to be able to be in two places at the same time, sir," he commented, "but I don't fancy managin' it in quite this way. In the final reckoning it's a mite too divisible."

Sulu's voice sounded over the open intercom before Kirk could reply.

"Bridge to Captain Kirk."

He moved to stand near the pickup. "What is it, Sulu?"

"Sir, something's taken over the ship's phaser banks! They're locking on the alien starship."

Now what? He dismissed the engineers and security men to their normal duties, then moved to the small wall-screen set close by the communicator. A quick touch and once more they were treated to a view of the magnificent, ancient vessel.

Suddenly, two thick beams of destroying energy licked out. They struck the alien, struck again. Huge sections of metallic lacework were blasted apart. Archwork and shattered pods disappeared as bolt after bolt of phaser energy tore at the helpless derelict. Bits and pieces vanished in a maelstrom of organized destruction.

Torn free and impelled by the force of the phasers' power, segments of the ship began to spin end over end. They dropped out of ages-old orbit, falling into the crushing gravity-well of the waiting dead sun. Kirk's comment came in a whisper.

"The creature has no respect for beauty, either."

"Or history, Captain," Spock added, equally shocked by the invader's actions. "All that knowledge . . . all those potential discoveries—lost forever."

"Perhaps even more, Mr. Spock."

Sulu showed obvious relief when the others reappeared on the bridge. He'd watched the dissolution of the alien vessel and experienced an unusual feeling of impotence as the phaser banks, usually under his control, failed to respond to repeated attempts to halt firing.

Kirk listened to his helmsman's comments as he resumed his command position.

"Phaser banks were off, Captain. They activated themselves. I tried, sir," he half-pleaded, "but—"

"Override systems refused to respond?"

"Yes, sir. How did you know, sir?"

"The same thing just happened in engineering, Mr. Sulu," informed Spock. "The same thing which has affected the life-support systems on decks five and six. About all that can be said in favor of our visitor is that it is not capricious. It is clearly about some private plan of its own. One which we seem quite unable to alter."

"If we only knew what it wants!" Kirk muttered through clenched teeth. The familiar hiss of the elevator doors operating sounded. He turned to see Scott and Dr. McCoy appear.

"No internal damage, Jim," said McCoy, nodding in the chief engineer's direction. "He's fine."

Scott's expression, however, was less encouraging.

"Let's have it, Scotty. Nothing you can say could really upset me any further—not now."

"Sir, we cannot get into the core. All exits are sealed. And that means . . ."

"That you can't arm the *Enterprise*'s self-destruct mechanism. What about cutter beams? They still seem to work. Can't you cut your way . . .?" He paused. Scott was shaking his head slowly.

"They might've worked a little while ago, sir. They're drained of all energy now. Apparently this creature has to sense something in operation before it can drain that something of power, or counter its command source. I don't pretend to understand how the creature does it, but there isn't a cutting or weldin' or seaming tool in the whole engineering section putting out enough juice to rearrange a loaf of stale bread."

"Captain—" Kirk turned his gaze to Uhura.

"What new good news do you have now, Lieutenant?"

"Cargo holds three, four, and five report shutdown of life-support systems. They've gone to belt-support."

"Terrific—that's just marvelous!" He spared a glance for the emergency telltales located at Scott's station. Spotted among the normal greens and blues were an uncomfortably large number of flashing reds. Even one of the galley lights was winking crimson.

"What the hell would the thing want in the galley?"

"Sir?" asked Spock, failing to sense the irony in Kirk's voice.

"Power is now out on all but key levels. Captain," informed Scott. "I'm getting a strong magnetic flux reading on all out decks."

"Captain!" Uhura shouted. She was staring in disbelief at her instruments. "Something's going through every computer bank on board, every microspool, every tape, every storage bin—and fast!"

Spock had backed slightly away from his station, watching while his dials and checkouts gave back impossible readings. Sulu's hands hovered hesitantly over his own console. The telltales of all the bridge computer systems—navigation, library, communications, engineering—were alive with myriad flashing, sparkling lights. All indications were that information was being processed through them simultaneously at an unbelievable rate.

Then the double-red local emergency lights went on, and the bridge alarm howled. They had very little autonomy left—or time. If Kirk was going to do anything he'd have to do it now. His mind raced. One last computer was as yet uncontrolled, unread, by the invader—a delicate marvel that could also process information with more insight, if not more speed, than all the onboard ship computers put together.

"Spock," he murmured finally, "can you rig a temporary, low-frequency shield, like the one we found on the alien ship, for our own navigation console?"

Spock hesitated briefly. "It would have to be a very small field, Captain."

"That's all right, Mr. Spock. Just the navigation console. I don't expect you to be able to whip up a convenient, invader-proof, bridge defense system in a couple of minutes. We're short on time."

That was enough for Spock. He bent over the navigation console and started to work smoothly, efficiently, among the instruments. Occasionally he asked Sulu for help and advice on this or that particular piece of circuitry or had him depress this or the other switch at a certain time.

Meanwhile, the force-fields of both men flared and gleamed bright as Spock played with local but powerful energies. The resulting radiance and field interaction gave each man a satanic silhouette.

Scott was bursting to complain about the lack of adequate safety precautions for such work, but he managed to contain himself. They had no time to be careful anymore.

After an interval of minutes that seemed like years, Spock stood and walked back to his station. Scott eyed the critical meters on his board and let out a sigh of relief.

"It's activated and in operation, Captain—but only for an area three meters square."

"How's the flux reading there now?" Kirk asked. Spock took his tricorder off a rack and moved back to stand close by the shielded section of console. He played the compact instrument over the affected section.

"Negative reading, Captain. The shielded area is completely normal." He moved the tricorder randomly over other sections

of the helm. "Especially now, compared to what the rest of the panel reads. Readings here are rising rapidly."

McCoy took a couple of steps forward and stared at the slightly lime-yellow section of shielded console in disbelief.

"Jim, you don't think this is going to help? Whatever this monster is, it's survived eons alone in a dead, empty hulk. All it has to do here is outlast us and take over."

Kirk's reply was rich with a certain morbid satisfaction.

"No, Bones. It is obviously trapped here by the gravitational power of the negative star-mass. We have already ascertained that it cannot travel freely in open space. Therefore it doubly needs a starship—this starship—to break free. And it must also need a crew to man it. Otherwise it would have left here long ago in the alien vessel we explored. Because—"

Further elaboration was cut off as the room suddenly was bathed in shades of color as brilliant as cut emerald. Something . . . spoke—using the computer speakers. The phrasing was oddly rushed, childishly impatient. But it was not the impatience of uncertainty, for no voice was more self-assured, more fully confident than this.

This is what it said.

"YOU ARE CORRECT, CAPTAIN JAMES T. KIRK! I POSSESS A GREAT MANY ABILITIES. BUT THE ABILITY TO BREAK FREE OF THE PULL OF THIS GRAVITY-WELL IS NOT ONE OF THEM. SO I DID . . . I DO . . . NEED A STARSHIP. NOW I HAVE ONE."

The voice rose to a shrill, almost hysterical scream.

"A BODY . . . TO HAVE A BODY . . . TO HAVE FORM . . . SOLID, SENSUOUS, AGAIN! SO LONG . . . SO TERRIBLY LONG!"

The voice ended abruptly. The flashing lights on the computer telltales suddenly died. Only the normal blink of standard activity now registered. If anything, the panels were even quieter than usual.

Spock ventured back to his library station and tried the controls. They worked normally. Only their readings and the information they now provided were abnormal. He studied them a moment, then looked back at Kirk.

"It has absorbed the computer banks, Captain. All of them. Language was naturally but one small section of the total information it gleaned."

Kirk eyed the walls thoughtfully, trying to penetrate to the heart of the softly ominous green glow that pulsed there.

"All the information in all the worlds of the Federation won't give it what it needs, Spock. A manipulative digit. In going through your library, I'm sure it discovered that we carry no manipulative robots on board that it could control."

If the captain expected that statement to provoke the creature, he failed. The alien seemed to have only a single tone of voice. One continuous flow of nervous emotion. The voice was a mirror image of its actions—violent and quick. It ignored the mild sarcasm, if indeed it was sensible to such subtleties, and spoke with single-minded purpose.

"YOU WILL NOW REMOVE THE STATIC SHIELD FROM THE NAVIGATION CONSOLE, CAPTAIN JAMES T. KIRK."

Kirk considered his reply carefully. It might still be possible to reason with this thing.

"You've shut down life-support systems and threatened the lives of my crew. I'll remove the static shield if you restore those systems first."

As he half-expected, even that modest request was denied. No, not even denied. It was ignored, treated as unworthy of comment. For this being, nothing existed outside of self.

"ALL NONESSENTIAL SYSTEMS HAVE BEEN EXTINGUISHED IN THE INTERESTS OF SIMPLIFYING CONTROL. OBEY ME!"

That made his decision simpler, if not more pleasant.

"And if I refuse?"

A phaser beam darted out of nowhere as Kirk rose in the command chair. No, it issued from . . . the automatic bridge defense system! The beam impacted on his force-field squarely and knocked him stumbling into a bulkhead.

"OBEY ME!" the alien thundered from all speakers.

Kirk tried to dodge out of the phaser's line of fire and searched frantically for cover. But he couldn't dodge the beam of the phaser anymore than one could escape sun in a desert. As for finding cover, the automatic defense system was very thorough. It had been carefully designed to permit a hostile intruder no cover.

The beam cut off for seconds, shot out again, and slammed him against a wall. It pinned him there like some shriveled,

colorful insect. His force-field flared pink, then red, turning slowly to a deep crimson. Beads of sweat began to form on his forehead. Though it hadn't broken through, the intense concentration of heat was starting to hurt like blazes. He felt himself weakening, slumped against the wall.

"Captain!"

Spock ran toward him, stopped. The beam left Kirk for a split second, affording him little relief. It moved to Spock. But when the science officer remained frozen in place, it swung back to batter again at Kirk's shield.

Spock took a heavy, metal-spined reference manual from a shelf and stepped quickly toward the bridge defense module. As he threw, the phaser beam looped around and struck at his ankles. The thrown book fell far short, bounced over the command chair. Moving higher the powerful beam shoved Spock back against the base of the library computer. Then it shifted slightly and he was washed down the floor along the wall like a leaf in the grip of a powerful hose.

It finally pinned him upright against a far bulkhead, holding him there until his force-field also flared pink, red, and crimson.

Kirk put a hand to his singed chest and rolled over slowly. He staggered to his feet. The first thing he saw was Spock, pinned up against the wall. Swaying, he took a step toward the science officer. It was the shock of the near-fatal phaser assault that had affected him, more than any actual physical damage. He knew what an uncontrolled phaser of even mild strength could do to something as fragile as a human body.

At that moment there was a deep red flare, almost black, from Spock's life-support belt. Then his force-field was gone, overloaded by the concentration of energy from the phaser. Immediately the beam stepped down to low power. It continued to focus on the center of Spock's chest. Kirk could have continued to advance, but now dared not.

From somewhere in the depths of the ship, from all around them, the implacable alien consciousness spoke.

"OBEY ME!"

It was Kirk's turn to scream.

"You'll hurt him!"

"REMOVE THE STATIC SHIELD FROM THE DRIVE CONTROLS AND NAVIGATION PANEL! DO IT NOW!"

No hint of compassion—not even a mention of Spock. There was absolutely no doubt in Kirk's mind that the creature would kill Spock slowly, without thought.

The subject lying under that threat still had his voice, if not his mobility.

"No, Captain!"

The phaser beam intensified ever so lightly. No cry of pain escaped Spock's lips, but he writhed. A tensing in the knuckles showed what he was feeling. Inwardly, Kirk slumped.

"I will obey. Let him go."

As quickly as that, the phaser beam was gone. Spock stood leaning against the wall for a moment longer. Then his legs gave way under him and he collapsed to the floor. Kirk took a step in his direction, but that damnable, all-seeing voice interrupted again, bellowing.

"NOW! IGNORE THE FALLEN BIPED AND PROCEED WITH THE FIELD REMOVAL!"

He turned and started reluctantly to the helm-navigation console. McCoy moved to Spock's side. There was a small but neat hole in the center of the science officer's shirt. McCoy dug out a tiny spray vial and began to work on the injury.

Kirk thought furiously. It was the end of everything—unless . . .

He looked down at his chest, where he'd been lightly burned . . . lower, to his stomach. His hand slipped slowly ever so slowly, down to his life-support belt.

"It's too fast for us, Doctor," Kirk said quickly. "So don't try deactivating the defense module with one of your sprays." McCoy looked up, puzzled.

Had the alien learned enough to read a human expression?

It had not. McCoy's response was to look at Kirk. In doing so he automatically brought the spray vial away from Spock, and up. The phaser shifted to cover McCoy and the almost awake Spock.

In that brief, unguarded instant Kirk whipped free his life-support belt with one hand, hit a switch on the console with

the other, and dropped the activated belt across a certain unshielded section of it. He jumped clear as the panel erupted in sparks and fiery flashes.

He'd been gambling that the creature wouldn't turn off the bridge life-support systems and risk killing them all. He was right.

But the phaser beam swung to burn an opening in the floor. Desperately he rolled to get away from it. It eventually caught up with him at the other end of the helm console. Stopping, the beam focused just a few centimeters to one side of his head. He could feel the deadly heat on his cheek. The beam had been raised to killing force.

V

"REPAIR THE WARP-DRIVE CONTROLS! OBEY ME!"

The now maddened voice had risen to a tremulous shriek.

Kirk got to his feet slowly, cautiously, making sure he made no rapid gestures that might be misinterpreted by the trigger-happy alien. As he rose the beam stayed centered parallel to his skull. He walked to the command chair.

"Mr. Scott."

"Yes, sir?"

"The warp-drive controls have burned out. Commence repairs immediately. Install the auxiliary bypass system."

If Scott suspected anything, he gave no sign.

"Aye, Captain." He looked around, his gaze coming to rest on the somnolent bridge defense mechanism. It was as good a point to direct his voice to as any.

"I'll need some cuttin' and repairin' tools." He pointed to a nearby locker. "I can get what I need in there—if you'll allow them to energize."

"YES, YES!" came the anxious voice, "BUT MAKE NO WRONG MOTIONS. I HAVE THE ENTIRE WARP-DRIVE AUXILIARY BYPASS SYSTEM AND REPAIR PROCEDURE FROM YOUR OWN COMPUTER RECORDS. HURRY!"

"Do as it says, Mr. Scott."

"Aye, Captain," Scott replied, keeping a determined pokerface. Not that he knew what Kirk had in mind, but he suspected the captain was up to something. And it was up to him to give Kirk as much time as possible to prepare for it.

He walked slowly to the locker, at the same time being careful not to move unnaturally and thus make the creature suspicious. There was a nervous moment as he energized the precision microwelder. Small as it was, it could still easily burn a hole even in a bridge defense module—if given the time.

However, the alien apparently felt secure in its control. It permitted him the necessary small tool. He walked to the

fused section of helm, examined it, and shook his head like a doctor clucking over a sick patient

Then he moved to the back of the bridge, near Uhura's station, and a small wall panel that needed to be removed. Controls and switching points were revealed within. There were also several long coils of fine cable.

As he brought the activated welder close and began to make the necessary connections, the voice again reverberated around the bridge.

"ANY ATTEMPT TO SABOTAGE THE AUXILIARY WARP-DRIVE CONTROLS, CHIEF ENGINEER MONTGOMERY SCOTT, WILL RESULT IN IMMEDIATE DESTRUCTION OF ALL OTHER BRIDGE PERSONNEL. I WOULD RATHER NOT RESORT TO THE USE OF INFERIOR, SECONDARY PERSONNEL TO CARRY OUT MY COMMANDS—BUT I WILL NOT HESITATE!"

"I'll be sure to try and keep that in mind," Scott mumbled, concentrating on the delicate work at hand.

Spock was on his feet again. He touched his chest once, looked at McCoy.

"A fine, professional job, Doctor. Fortunately, your medicine is more effective than your jokes." For once, McCoy didn't feel up to a reply.

The science officer walked over to stand next to Kirk. Both faced casually away from the bridge defense system's video pickup. Apparently the creature's abilities did not also include mind reading. It had divined nothing of Kirk's series of delaying actions beyond their immediate practical effects.

The defense sphere's sound pickups were not designed to detect whispering. It was primarily a visual device. Normal ship noises would have drowned out soft talk and only confused an efficient mechanism. So the two men felt reasonably secure in conversing.

"Let's have it all, Spock. You've had enough experience with this creature's actions to have formed some solid opinions about it, at least. What are we dealing with?"

Spock rubbed his chest again. "Beyond its undeniable belligerence, Captain, we know nothing about its mental composition. We can theorize more thoroughly about its physical makeup.

"It seems to be some form of pure energy organism, without much actual mass, and it is essentially electromagnetic in nature. At the same time, it appears capable of a strong parasitic relationship with a solid host body. A starship could provide such a body, it seems.

"It appears to utilize the electronic network of the *Enterprise* the way a man or Vulcan uses the nervous system of his body. It has, in effect, become the *Enterprise*. We, on the other hand, are only marginally beneficial organisms in its structure, like the white corpuscles in human blood. That is, some of us are. Apparently it regards most of the crew as unwelcome growths—germs—simply to be disposed of as rapidly and with as little effort as possible.

"And, Captain, the computer library still operates. It has indicated that the flux readings are growing in strength. The longer this being has to adjust to its new body, the stronger and more secure it grows."

Kirk dropped his voice even lower. If the alien could somehow pick it up and understand it, then all was lost. But it had given no sign of being able to so far. And devilish subtlety did not seem to be one of its characteristics. They had no choice but to try. Spock was looking at him expectantly and Kirk remembered that he couldn't read minds, either.

"The slingshot effect, to throw us free of this gravity and out of orbit—can you do the necessary math in your mind, Spock? I've got reasons for not using the navigation computer."

Spock nodded. "I see. Yes, the alien would know. I believe I can, Captain. Soon I will have to aid Mr. Scott, but my mind and hands can operate on different projects at the same time."

Kirk turned and raised his voice as he addressed the rotating sphere of the defense mechanism.

"The chief engineer will need assistance from my first officer to complete repairs. Is this permitted?"

Circuits continued to open and close. Human diaphragms operated somewhat slower. Otherwise there was little motion on the bridge. Spock strode slowly, cautiously, to where Scott was working. Kirk kept a wary eye on the dormant phaser, but no punishment, no warning was forthcoming.

"I guess it is," he murmured.

"WHEN REPAIRS ARE COMPLETED," came the voice suddenly and, as usual, without any warning, "YOU WILL LEAVE THIS ORBIT AND PLOT A COURSE THIRTY-SIX POINT THREE TWO ONE FROM OUR PRESENT LOCATION."

Sulu spoke up.

"That's the heart of the galaxy, Captain!"

"Set the course, Mr. Sulu."

Sulu looked back at him incredulously and made no move to obey. Spock glanced over from his work and spoke.

"Captain, we've seen this creature separate itself into different parts. If it can divide and grow, it could take over every starship we meet. It could control entire computer centers—perhaps whole planets."

"I am aware of that, Mr. Spock. But we have," and he looked downcast, "no choice, I'm afraid."

"COMPLETE REPAIRS!" screamed the voice, "OBEY ME!"

"Set the course, Mr. Sulu! That's an order."

"Yes, sir." Sulu's reply held a hint of bitterness.

Scott and Spock unwound two small cables from the recess in the wall and ran them along the deck to the burned-out navigation console. Working with the microwelder and Spock's assistance, Scott proceeded to install a small metal box to one side of the melted panel.

The box's face contained a basic, simplified version of the ruined warp-drive controls. The engineer made a last connection, wiped his forehead with the back of a hand, and took a deep breath.

"Auxiliary controls ready to activate, Captain." Everyone on the bridge was staring at Kirk.

The Captain looked up at the sphere, hardly daring to breathe and yet forcing himself to maintain a normal tone of voice.

"The auxiliary controls can only be opened manually."

At that, the memory banks of Spock's computer-library station suddenly hummed into operation. No one needed to be told what was taking place. The creature was checking

Kirk's statement against the operations manuals stored deep within the ship.

Eventually the lights at the computer station returned to normal. There was a short, screaming silence. Kirk willed himself not to sweat.

"THAT IS CORRECT. OPERATE THE MANUAL CONTROLS. OBEY!"

Kirk breathed an unseen sigh of thankfulness and offered prayer to all supernatural deities who looked after starship skippers. Then he nodded slowly to Scott.

The engineer moved back toward his own station. Kirk rose and walked calmly to the auxiliary control box. He placed his hands on the simplified device. It was only illusion, but the smooth metal controls and knobs felt hot.

"Control activated." He paused, started toward another set of switches. "Setting cour—" His hands moved in a blur.

The *Enterprise*'s engines slammed into emergency drive. Not away, toward the beckoning mist of the Milky Way, but down, down and in, toward the devouring black maw below.

Sulu jerked in his seat as the dark bulk of the dead sun grew suddenly enormous in the main viewscreen. He spun to face Kirk.

"Captain, we're falling out of orbit! We're falling into the star!"

"APPLY FULL POWER—REVERSE ENGINES!" shrieked the disembodied alien, "OBEY ME, OBEY ME!"

The bridge defense phaser came on, swung around to touch Kirk's back. He jerked and hung grimly to the controls. He had no force-field to protect him now, with his life-support belt fused to the original controls.

Picking up speed with every microsecond, the *Enterprise* rushed toward the destroying gravity below. The phaser abruptly cut off—and Kirk cursed silently. The creature had guessed what he was trying to do. If it killed him while he was hanging onto the controls and failed to cut his hands free in time . . .

It tried something else, and for a few seconds Kirk was forced to fall away. The entire console section and even the deck around the manual control unit began to glow with heat. At the same time the walls of the bridge began to fluoresce

an angry, pulsing green. The vivid color deepened and dimmed in indecipherable, distorted patterns. The voice of the alien rose to a terrible, frightened scream.

"NO, DECELERATE! DO NOT DESTROY THE SHIP! OBEY—OBEY—OBEY!"

Kirk had glanced down at his hands, then back at the glowing console. If the alien realized that at any second it could now safely kill him and induce another member of the crew to operate the controls . . .

He threw himself back on the metal box and its burning knobs and dials. There was a sizzling sound and the odor of burnt flesh filled the bridge. Uhura screamed. Tears streamed from Kirk's eyes, but his hands stayed frozen on the controls.

"Stand by to activate warp—drive!" he gasped. Spock instantly took the vacant assistant helmsman's place next to Sulu . . . in case.

"NO . . . DON'T!" came the terrified voice. The *Enterprise* dove toward the extinct solar furnace. It filled the viewscreen now, as complete a grave as any man could wish for. Its surface was alive with brilliant discharges of electricity.

The starship glowed all over with a soft green aura. This rapidly coalesced into a single, bright blob of beating, living light. On the bridge the green luminescence of the walls suddenly faded and seemed to sink into the metal. The phaser beam of the defense sphere abruptly cut off.

That was the first sign. Now for the final blow.

"Activate warp-drive!" Kirk managed to cough out. The white heat of the panel had vanished at the same time as the phaser beam, but the metal was still fearfully hot. If it was a last, desperate ruse by the creature to get him away from the controls, it failed.

"Activated, Captain," came Spock's prompt reply.

The ship shuddered briefly as the titanic warp-drive engines cut in. There was a last faint pulse of green radiance—then it was gone. A final, despairing cry, shrill and weak now, came from the speakers.

"PLEASE . . . DON'T!"

Suddenly the *Enterprise* seemed to leap toward the black sphere, toward the very horizon of the sun that was no more. It seemed impossible that it could miss that sucking, grasping

target. It *must* strike, vanish in a blank flash of instant annihilation. The image of the starship wavered as it reached the critical point of that bottomless pit of gravity, seemed to flow like a liquid . . . and disappear.

An instant later the combination of emergency overdrive and the tremendous pull of the star had flung the *Enterprise* far beyond any threat—far beyond any clutch of its relentless tug.

For a few seconds the star wore a ring of incredible thinness. A tiny narrow band of soft green circled the black sphere, revealing a last, hopeless grab for a ship safely out of its reach. Forever out of its reach.

Then the green ring contracted, shrunk in on itself, to become a single bright, emerald blob of incandescent life—an amorphous mass of now harmless malevolence.

"You can let go now, Captain," said Spock gently.

"Let . . . go . . .?" Kirk mumbled. His eyes glazed. Spock reached over and gripped the captain's wrists. They pulled easily but that death grip was not so simply broken. Spock reached around more firmly and pulled, pulled again, hard. This time both hands came free of the controls.

Kirk slumped in Spock's arms, unconscious. The second-in-command of the *Enterprise* carried his captain over to the command chair. Sulu immediately put the helm on automatic and took over the warp-drive controls, his hands safely encased in a pair of thick protective gloves. He brought the *Enterprise* down from emergency to normal cruising speed.

McCoy had been waiting. Spock watched him at his work. When he spoke, his tone was as emotionless as ever—and as lucid, curious.

"Well, Doctor?" McCoy was already working with a second kind of spray, then rapidly applying some white cream to Kirk's hands—those blackened, terribly burned hands. The cream hardened instantly to an almost plastic consistency. He smiled just a little.

"I don't find any serious nerve damage, Mr. Spock. Nothing that won't repair itself. As for the skin, that's easy to regenerate. Oh, someone will have to feed him for a few

days, but other than that . . ." He smiled wider. "He'll be as good as new."

Sulu, Uhura, and Scott all turned away—so that no one else could see how relieved they were. McCoy moved to the nearest intercom, which happened to be the one in the command chair, and thumbed the switch.

"Sick Bay? Doctor McCoy here. I want a medtable on the bridge, double-time."

Spock was watching Kirk. The captain's eyes fluttered as both anesthetic and stimulants took effect.

"Is it . . . it . . . gone?"

"Affirmative, Captain." At moments like this Spock almost wished he could smile—but only for the therapeutic effect it would have on Kirk, of course.

"It left the ship when it thought we would crash into the negative stellar mass. In the end it seems that the alien's instinct for self-preservation, even after all these millennia, was stronger than its analytic abilities. If it had gambled and stayed with us another few seconds it would still be with us. Now it is trapped back there once more.

"And now that we know it is there, we can enter its description, dangerous characteristics, and location with Starfleet, so that any other exploring vessels that visit this sector can give it a wide berth."

The elevator door dilated, and a pair of medical techs with a mobile medtable between them entered. Under McCoy's direction they lined it up parallel to the command chair. Both techs gave a little start when they saw that the patient-to-be was the captain, but McCoy reassured them.

"It's all right Darrell, Elayne—nothing too serious."

Kirk eyed the medtable and then shifted his gaze to the face of the good doctor.

"What's that for, Bones? I'm all right. You just said so yourself."

"I know, Jim. There's nothing wrong with you at all that a pair of new hands won't fix." He patted the table. "Be a good boy and climb aboard without forcing me to tranquillize you, hmmm? I will if I have to, you know."

"Okay, okay! Don't threaten me, Bones."

"Threaten, Jim?" McCoy grinned.

With the help of the two techs and Spock, Kirk slid onto the table. The table was convoyed to the elevator.

"Wait a minute, Mr. Spock—Captain," Uhura broke in. McCoy froze the elevator open. Her brows drew together as she fiddled with her controls.

"We're still picking up emissions from the area of the dead star. It's growing faint as we move away, but . . . ah, there!" She did things with the amplifiers.

A tremulous, desperate voice filtered through the speaker. A familiar voice, made harmless now by increasing distance and hopelessness.

"DON'T LEAVE ME ALONE AGAIN! OH, PLEASE, PLEASE!"

No one on the bridge said anything. There was a crackle of static as a different source of distant energy from another star announced its own presence. Then a final, faint piping.

"SO LONELY . . . OH, DON'T GO! DON'T . . . DON . . ."

The voice vanished, swallowed down and digested by distance.

"It doesn't sound so dangerous now, does it, Mr. Spock?" Kirk whispered.

"The creature? No, Captain. Not now. But the danger behind it remains."

"If only the alien had tried to cooperate, to communicate instead of threaten . . ." He shook his head tiredly, beginning to feel the side effects of McCoy's ministrations as they rode down the elevator. He stared at the steady light set in its roof.

"What makes a thinking, intelligent being act in such a fashion?"

"Who knows, Captain? We know not where it comes from. And we do not even know what makes certain men or Vulcans act the way they do. The creature's instincts, in the final analysis, are not so incomprehensible—or even alien."

"Now you're acting unnecessarily rational, Spock."

"To me, Captain," Spock replied, "that is a contradiction in terms."

"You know," said Kirk abruptly, "I think I can feel my hands again. They're beginning to tingle slightly."

He felt a pressure on his upper right shoulder.

"What was that?" Turning his head slightly he saw that they were entering Sick Bay. "Bones, what have you done to me now?" McCoy smiled down at him reassuringly.

"You're coming out of shock, Jim. I just gave you a good dose of something to keep your mind off it. If I didn't, despite the local anesthetic, in a few minutes those hands would do more than just tingle slightly."

"Shock? What do you mean, shock? I'm not in shock, Spock." McCoy had to grin. "And nothing you slipped me, Bones, is going to make me go un . . ."

YESTERYEAR

(Adapted from a script by D. C. Fontana)

I

A world of silvery sky.

There seemed to be no oceans; but they were there, rolling and heaving under the shining clouds. There seemed to be no deserts; yet they existed, too. Dry, bone dry, and inhospitable, and old. There seemed to be no green forests or rolling hills. True, they were rare; but they too held a real existence.

There only seemed to be sky.

There was a peculiar atmospheric aura to this world—a kind of shimmer in the stratosphere that rippled and flowed with strange effects—other than merely meteorological.

Kirk finished his glass of reconstituted rombouton juice, prepared on a distant South Pacific isle on Earth itself, and studied the image on the viewscreen before him. He touched a button on the arm of the command chair and leaned over to direct his voice into the open grid.

"Captain's Log, stardate . . ." He burped, rather loudly, and looked around in mild embarrassment. Everyone on the bridge studiously avoided looking back at him. But at the helm, Sulu made a sound suspiciously like a stifled chuckle.

"You find our approach maneuvers amusing, Mr. Sulu?" Kirk was not in the best of moods. His newly regenerated skin on his hands itched something fierce.

"No, sir," deadpanned Sulu in return. He examined the readouts of the navigation computer most intently.

Satisfied that dignity had been maintained, Kirk hit the switch once more. "Erase that last," he muttered, then began again.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 5373.4." He paused, formed his thoughts.

"After an unexpected delay of some substantial awkwardness . . ."

"What was that I once heard you say about my tendency to understate, Captain?" came Spock's quiet voice from the area of the library-computer console.

"Quiet, Mr. Spock. I'm recording. Or trying to." He hit the unlucky switch again, irritably. "Cancel that last.

"Captain's Log, stardate 5373.4 After an unexpected delay of some substantial awkwardness . . ." he glared around, but this time no one saw fit to interpose a comment, ". . . we resumed our original course and are now lying in orbit around the planet of the time vortex.

"Commander Spock and I will land to carry out basic research for the Institute of Galactic History, in conjunction with and in support of similar research to be conducted by historians Jan Grey, Loom Aleek-om, and Ted Erickson.

"Dr. Leonard McCoy will also accompany us, as . . ." He held the panic button down and looked back to where Dr. McCoy was standing, idly observing the view of the planet rotating lazily below. "How do you want to go into the record on this, Bones?"

"What?" McCoy dragged his attention away from the fascinating image of the time planet. "Oh, might as well play it linear, Jim. 'Interested onlooker' will do. I'm not hunting for academic credits."

"Attaboy, Bones. I thought you'd say something like that." Kirk let the pause switch up. ". . . as interested onlooker." Satisfied, he switched off the log and thumbed a communicator switch.

"Historians Grey, Aleek-om, and Erickson report to the transporter room, please. We are ready for descent" He flipped the communicator off and rose.

"Lieutenant Sulu?" The younger officer glanced up from the helm. "You're in command in my absence."

"Yes, sir," Sulu replied. He hesitated, then spoke quickly, earnestly. "I sure wish I was going down with you, sir. I've heard a great deal about the Guardian of Forever."

Spock and McCoy were waiting at the elevator, and Kirk moved to join them.

"It can be very interesting at times, Mr. Sulu—that's true. It can also be infernally dull. Either way, you know the regulations. No one is permitted on the surface outside the reception station except authorized research personnel and

Starfleet officers with the rank of Lt. Commander and above." He smiled.

"You'll be there in a couple of years, Lieutenant."

When they'd left, Sulu looked back at Uhura.

"Somehow, Uhura, I get the impression the captain's not terribly enthusiastic about this expedition."

Uhura replied while taking the opportunity—now that the commanding officers were absent—to touch up her makeup. "I suppose even the most exciting of pasts can grow dull with repetition. Seeing a famous person or witnessing an important historical event could be offset by bad smells and unsanitary plumbing.

"Besides, you can blame him for being a bit blasé after what we just went through with that—that *thing* on the fringe?" She whistled. "Substantial awkwardness . . . wow!"

The three historians were already waiting in the main transporter room when Kirk, Spock, and McCoy arrived. All appeared outwardly composed, but their faces betrayed the excitement they were feeling. Two had made the trip to the surface once before.

Their anticipation was understandable—history was their chosen profession. The discovery of the Time Planet—and the subsequent development of the Guardian of Forever and the Time Gate as a research tool—had been to the study of galactic history what the invention of the warp-drive had been to interstellar travel. Kirk could empathize with their special excitement, even if he couldn't wholly share in it.

Of the three, Erickson and Grey were human, Erickson was a small, intense man in his mid-forties, with thinning grey hair cut in bangs in the front—Vulcan style. His limbs seemed to be in constant motion, like the legs of a millipede. The most noticeable facet of his personality was his finding everything, absolutely everything, to be "fine, just fine"—and said so.

Jan Grey was slightly younger, taller and she had a pleasant narrow face that was now glowing with inner anticipation. Both humans wore plain grey jumpsuits emblazoned with the crossed Ionic column and short spade of physical history. They carried elaborate tricorders in shoulder harness.

The third member of the official research party, Loom Aleekom was neither human nor Vulcan. The native of Aurelia stood head and shoulders above Spock, though he was thinner and lighter than any of them, even Grey.

His wings he kept neatly folded along the line of his back. Short arms ended in a spread of delicately taloned claws, which could manipulate the extremely fine controls on his own, smaller tricorder.

Tattooed on his beak was an intricate scroll—sign of manhood—above which wide, black eyes shone piercingly. They were in startling contrast to his brilliant gold and blue-green plumage.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Kirk smiled, "are you ready?" A rhetorical question. Erickson couldn't resist waving his pudgy arms in reply anyway.

"Ready?" he chirped, feigning disbelief. "We've been ready for days, for months for this minute, Captain! First we encounter that terrible monster and I thought we'd never get here at all. Then more days of unexpected travel and waiting. And you want to know if we're ready?"

"I do not believe I shall ever understand this extraordinary affectation of humans," mused Spock as they took their places in the transporter alcove, "for answering a simple, direct question with half a dozen inane ones."

"Don't worry, Spock," replied Kirk, scratching at his newly grown right palm, "it's not contagious."

"I sincerely hope not, Captain," said Spock fervently.

Beaming down was convenient and quick, though uneventful. They missed the spectacular sights of shuttling down through the silver atmosphere.

No one would miss a descent to the dry, semidesert section they would eventually arrive at, however.

Oddly, very little was known of the early civilizations of the Time Planet itself. Nor of how its inhabitants were able to unite a seething infinitude of time lines and tie them to a single point on their world. Nor why.

Oh, the usual reasons were given . . . curiosity sparked them, and the spirit of scientific exploration. But Kirk and many others couldn't help but believe that the builders of

such an incredible device as the Guardian of Forever must have had some other, unknown, more potent reason for constructing it.

There was irony on a grand scale present, too. For in tying together thousands upon thousands of time lines, the builders of the Guardian of Forever had apparently neglected to tie in their *own*. So historians could use the Guardian to research the reasons behind any great invention—except the Guardian.

A distant chance existed that this was not in fact the case, that the time line of the Guardian's inventors was in truth accessible. But if so, it had not yet been discovered. It's builders had covered their own past too well.

The research party materialized at the modest, clean reception station of the Historical Institute. The reception port was fully automated, proceeding on the logic that machines couldn't be bribed. Anyone attempting to beam down to another part of the planet, illegally, would have found himself materialized instead—thanks to elaborate transporter intercepts—inside one of the well-armed armored fortresses that circled the time planet with unceasing, never-tiring vigilance.

The station was near the southern sector of the best preserved portion of the massive urban ruins that rose near the Guardian. The city of Oyya, all two thousand square kilometers of it, was itself a formidable subject for historical and archaeological study.

Excavations had revealed that at one time the city was even greater in extent. And there were ruins of other enormous cities scattered around the planet, many even larger than Oyya. But none were so well preserved.

Had the Time Planet, then, once been severely overpopulated? Was the Time Gate a last, desperate means of finding a way to relieve population pressure before it overwhelmed its creators? There was evidence to support such a theory.

Most particularly, despite the unquestionably high degree of civilization attained on this world, there was no hint, no sign that its inhabitants had ever discovered a drive capable of carrying them from star to star. And there were no other

planets, uninhabitable or otherwise, in the Time Planet's system. It didn't have even a single moon.

The Time Planet was alone in space. Its visionaries and explorers had been forced to go adventuring in time.

The automatic checkpoints at the reception station were thorough and efficient. As soon as they'd cleared, they were met at the exit lounge by the head of the Institute's main station on the planet, Dr. Vassily.

Dr. Vassily was elderly, silver haired, scintillating of mind, very female, and built like a hockey puck. Notwithstanding, she had the voice of a pixyish eleven-year-old.

She invited them into the nearby central building, a spartan yet comfortable facility, for a light snack and some heavy conversation. Visitors were still a rarity on the Time Planet.

Brandied tea, cake—the tea was good, even if reconstituted. Somehow, though, reconstituted brandied tea, in all its varied brands and types, never approached the real thing. Of course, the natural product was far beyond the financial reach of pioneer historians—however revered and respected.

Kirk forced himself to make easy conversation with the good doctor. It wasn't hard; she was fascinating. But before long Erickson was squirming like a jellyfish with the fidgets, Aleek-om was beginning to flap his wings nervously, sending feathers into everyone's tea, and even the normally imperturbable Jan Grey was showing signs of severe impatience.

"We certainly appreciate your hospitality, Dr. Vassily," Kirk said smoothly and honestly. "But as you can probably tell, my professional charges are anxious to be about their job."

"Of course," she nodded sagely. "Thoughtless of me. I've been working here for so many years I'd forgotten what the experience of a first trip to the Gate means to outsiders." Her voice turned brisk and workmanlike.

"There's a ground car waiting for you outside in the motor-pool hangar. Take the black and yellow one. I've had it pre-checked and fueled for you." She rose, her coveralls falling in shapeless wrinkles around her stout form, and walked them to the door. It stood open to the dry desert air. The climate here

sucked moisture from unprepared bodies, but the temperature was not as severe as on other parts of the Time Planet.

She directed her attention to Aleek-om. "By the way, Loom, what time line are you going to search out?" Aleek-om's upper and lower beak clicked several times in rapid succession—a sign of humor among his kind.

"Why, that of the city Oyya's, of course—*cher-wit*!" Dr. Vassily smiled at the in-joke.

"It's been tried, believe me. With every semantic variation you could think of. Every play on words, every stretching of definitions. The Guardian's reply to such requests is always the same.

" 'There is no access through the Gate to the requested time line'." Aleek-om looked suddenly serious.

"Dr. Vassily, do you really think the builders of the Guardian forgot to tie their own time line into the device?"

"No one can say for sure, of course," she replied, wholly professional now. "Personally, I tend to the belief that any race which could construct such an astounding phenomenon as the Guardian would not overlook something that affected them so deeply and so closely. I prefer to think that for their own unknown reasons they denied access to their own past—to themselves and to those who might come after them.

"We may never know the truth, and I want to!" She grinned awkwardly, a little embarrassed at the sudden outburst of emotion.

On the way to the motor-pool hangar, this was commented on. Grey found it unseemly. Aleek-om attributed it to too little fresh contact with others. Erickson thought it only human.

Spock, as usual, pinpointed it.

It was called dedication.

The ground, car carried them easily and rapidly over the dry terrain. It was fifteen kilometers from the reception station to the site itself.

There was no Gate, no artificial barrier in evidence around the Guardian. It had value beyond measure, value that transcended mere monetary considerations. Anyone who

wished to try and destroy it—if, indeed, it could be destroyed—might seemingly have free and clear access to it. It had been demonstrated time and time again that madmen would attempt most anything.

Nor was there any visible bar to potential misusers of the device. It seemed that anyone who could manage the time and expense necessary to reach the Time Planet and who shuttled instead of beaming down to its surface could make whatever use of the Gate he wished.

Of course, there was the small matter of slipping past the four superbly equipped orbital fortresses that covered every square meter of the planet in a ring of destructive power. Power reserved elsewhere only for protecting prime military centers.

It meant avoiding the gigantic phaser and missile batteries buried deep in the innocent-looking sands that drifted in low dunes around the Guardian itself.

But anyone who could get past that—well, access to the Time Gate was quite free to all such.

Such elaborate precautions were more than justified.

It would not do to allow the frivolous or unstable access to the malleable past. So the missiles that remained locked in their racks and the phasers that sat on their stores of ravening energy and did not disturb the desert bushes around them were occasionally publicized. Thus far no one had yet tempted them.

A well-mounted military expedition might possibly have succeeded in seizing the Guardian by force, if it managed to avoid total destruction in the battle that would ensue with the planetary defenses.

But that would mean war. Access of a belligerent to an enemy's past, well, it was unthinkable. So three empires and two interstellar federations cooperated in policing the Time Planet. They were reassured by the certain knowledge that anyone of them who dared try to make use of the Guardian for its own purposes would invite the immediate wrath of the other four.

It might not have been the most civilized of arrangements, but it worked.

Not that the setting of the Guardian was unimpressive, oh no. Hydrogen missiles might be larger, planet-to-space phasers more intricate, but none could match the nearby city of Oyya for sheer splendor. It stretched on and on, magnificent ruins dominating the horizon as far as one could see to east and south.

And of course, there was the Guardian of Forever itself.

Physically, it was impressive without being massive. Certainly in size it was nothing to match such awe-inspiring artifacts of ancient civilizations as the Temple of Halos on Canabbra IV, or the Aljaddean Wall on Qahtan.

In color it was the shade of rusty iron, spotted here and there with overtones of grey. In shape it resembled a lopsided doughnut. The central hollow of that doughnut was the actual Time Gate. It was always filled with luminous, shifting images of a thousand pasts, all racing by at speeds far too rapid for even scanning tubes to pick out and disseminate.

They left the ground car near a clump of some hearty green-brown desert bushes and walked up until they stood a couple of meters in front of the cut stone base. Kirk and Spock, having been here before, chose instead to spend a moment observing their fellow observers.

Grey just stood there quietly, her eyes shining. Aleek-om's wings fluttered gently and thin claws drew small preparatory beeps from his special tricorder. As for Erickson, he shoved both fists into chubby hips, blew out his cheeks, and beamed.

"Well, isn't this *fine*—just *fine*!" he said reverently. He turned to his companions. "Let's get a-move on."

Grey seemed to float back to reality from some distant place. "Yes, by all means. You know the rules." Aleek-om nodded, a thoroughly humanoid gesture.

"Only one of us is permitted to undertake the actual entry and journey with Captain Kirk and Commander Spock acting as supplementary observers and escort. The rest of us will remain here in the present time to record and interpret the subsequent flow of regularized time-sequences."

Then the three historians did a curious thing. They bent over and spent several moments searching the ground. When they stood, each placed his or her open palm face up towards

a common center. Two pebbles of varying size lay in each palm.

"All right, get ready" Grey instructed. Hands were placed behind backs, Grey doing likewise.

"I beg your pardon, Captain," murmured Spock curiously, "but what, exactly, is happening?"

"We're going to decide which one of us goes and which two stay behind, Commander," Grey told him.

Spock considered this. "I see—no, I do not see. You will pardon me, Historian Grey. I am not familiar with the intimate interworkings of professionals in your field—so perhaps I should not venture to comment upon them—but this does not strike me as an especially scientific way of determining the composition of this expedition."

Aleek-om shook his feathered head again, set brilliant gold plumes dancing. "If I live for a thousand mating flights, I'll never understand you Vulcans."

"Ready?" queried Grey.

"Ready," the two males echoed.

"Now!"

Each thrust a closed fist into the center of their little circle while Grey counted, "One . . . two . . . three!"

Three hands opened. A single pebble rested in Grey's open palm, another in Aleek-om's.

"Ah, that's fine, colleagues," announced Erickson, "truly fine!" He tossed both his revealed pebbles over his shoulder. They dropped their own, downcast. It didn't last but a moment.

"Well, good luck, old boy," said Aleek-om, and Grey concurred. "Yes, good luck, Theodore."

They proceeded to a solemn shaking of hands. Aleek-om curled his hand in a peculiar way so as not to scratch a sensitive human palm. Then the two unlucky historians began to prepare their tricorders.

"Captain," intoned a thoroughly puzzled Spock, "I confess I am still confused by this method of selection for such an important mission. I don't believe I have witnessed anything quite so arbitrary since . . ."

"I'll explain it all to you later, Mr. Spock," Kirk grinned, "in the future. Right now, Mr. Erickson seems impatient to be on his way,"

"Yes, yes," insisted the little historian, waving his arms like a semaphoring turtle, "let's get going."

The other historians turned their tricorder's visual pickups on and aimed them at the flowing Time Gate. Erickson mounted the stone platform and took up a position just in front of it. Kirk flanked him on the right side, Spock on the other. Then his voice boomed out—a squeaky parody of an old-line politician's.

"Guardian of Forever!"

For a long moment nothing happened. Then, from somewhere out of the air in front of them, a ponderous, rolling voice replied. It was heavy with age and weighty with infinite patience. Was this an accumulated effect, from answering thousands of inquiries? Or was it the Guardian's original voice? Kirk wondered. It always responded with perfect fluency to any question, no matter what language it was framed in.

Regardless, the effect produced by those thunderous yet gentle tones was sobering.

The last vestiges of humor disappeared from the little assembly. Everyone was all business now.

"TO WHENCE DO YOU WISH TO TRAVEL, AND FROM WHENCE COME YE," rumbled that mighty voice.

"We come from elsewhere," answered Erickson formally, his words ridiculously inadequate in counterpoint to that stentorian thunder. "And we wish the elsewhen of the Empire of Orion."

The Empire of Orion! Kirk started. He'd never bothered to inquire which time line the historians intended to explore. They hadn't struck him as a particularly adventurous bunch. Erickson's request came as a double surprise.

He'd figured this group of academicians for something much duller and more mundane than this. Say, the Butterfly Wars of Lepidopt, or the ceramic- and porcelain-making era of Sang Ho Hihn.

But, the Empire of Orion!

He found himself getting just a little bit excited. This was going to be rather more fun than he'd anticipated.

There was a clouding effect obscuring the Gate. A creamy blue-green blur filmed over the hazy surface of the circular center. As it did so, the dizzying array of time scenes began to slow. It was like watching a projector gradually wind down from a high speed—the visual equivalent of a slowing tape.

Eventually only a single alien scene remained. It did not shift, did not ripple, but held steady and clear. The blur started to fade. As it did so it was replaced in the scene by natural colors.

When they passed through the Time Gate, their first task would be to obtain a change of clothing. In the barbaric Empire of Orion, two starship uniforms and the casual dress of Historian Erickson would render them something less than inconspicuous. No one knew what passed for casual dress in that time period. Kirk knew this was so because if they *did* know, the historians would have had their necessary costumes prepared in advance.

Fortunately, the medium of exchange was only gold, and Erickson was amply supplied. They'd have no trouble making any needed purchases. Erickson was probably pleased. It gave him an excuse to bring back three sets of the genuine article—for study, of course. It was forbidden to profit materially from a journey through the Gate. Otherwise, the most dedicated researcher might be tempted to travel back in time to, say Earth's past and return with some little valuable knickknack like Praxiteles lost gold statue of Pallas Athena.

They could touch things, move about, and purchase, but nothing of real value could be brought back except for study purposes.

Once through, they would spend some thirty minutes objective time. That might be several days in the subjective time of the Orionic Empire. Then, wherever they happened to be in space in that ancient civilization, the Guardian would reach out and pull them back to the present, ejecting them once more on silent desert sands.

Thirty minutes! Even the great, still unexplained energies that powered the Guardian could not hold open a time vortex any longer than that. And the amount of power necessary to

hold a time dilation for even five minutes objective time was nothing short of astronomical. It was generally agreed on that the Guardian somehow drew directly on the local sun for power—but exactly how this was accomplished was still a source of mystery and controversy.

"Captain Kirk, Commander Spock," piped Erickson, "if you're ready, gentlemen?"

"Whenever you are, Mr. Erickson," acknowledged Kirk. Erickson turned to glance back behind himself.

"Ready, colleagues?"

"Ready, short stuff," grinned Grey.

"Go get 'em, Ted," cheered Aleek-om.

"Then, gentlemen," he said importantly to Kirk and Spock, "if you will, on three—one, two, three . . ." They stepped forward.

Two seekers of knowledge . . . one human, the other faintly so, stood alone on the sandy plain where a moment before they had been five. Two seekers of knowledge—and one interested onlooker. McCoy had chosen to remain quietly in the background.

The early Empire civilization turned out to be a maelstrom of colors and sights and fascinating detail through which Kirk, Spock, and the little historian moved like wraiths in a dream. The sounds matched the barbaric imagery—the unexpected and incredible exceeded the wildest expectations. They spent two and a half days, Orion time.

When their thirty real minutes were up, seemingly seconds later, Kirk was as sorry to leave as Erickson.

One moment they were changing clothes in the backroom of a disreputable inn in a gaudy bazaar, while meters away an equally disreputable personage was auctioning off modest examples of local feminine pulchritude. The next, they were standing once again on the stone platform facing the Guardian.

Grey and Aleek-om made no move to approach them as the three travelers swayed uneasily. There was always a moment or two of nausea that followed any passage through a time vortex. Then their systems had readjusted to the sudden

change in climate and gravity and other variables, and they stood easily once again.

Both historians appeared excited and pleased by the stream of slowed time pictures from different time-sequences that they'd been able to examine and record. Apparently that had been exciting enough. No one seemed the least upset now at being left behind.

Erickson, for his part, was flushed with a glow that on a more imposing individual might have been interpreted as maniacal.

Kirk noticed McCoy staring at Spock. There was an expression of mild concern and some puzzlement on the doctor's face. Studious physician to the end, the Captain reflected.

Come to think of it, Aleek-om and Grey also seemed to be staring at the science officer. But in the first flush of excitement at their successful journey and return, Kirk didn't notice the intensity of their stares. For that matter, neither did Spock or Erickson.

"Relax, Bones, we're all fine. Usual upset stomach, and that's all but gone. Orion at the dawn of civilization, Bones! Just watching, not interacting significantly for fear of changing some tiny bit of history . . ." He paused. The others were paying absolutely no attention to him. Instead, they continued to stare at Spock.

For the first time, Kirk took notice of their odd fascination with his assistant.

"What's the matter?" He still smiled. "Bones, what's wrong?"

Dr. McCoy did a rather startling thing, then. He jerked his head in Spock's direction, then pointed at him. His voice was open, curious.

"Who's he, Jim?"

This outrageous comment took some time to register. Kirk looked over at Spock reflexively. It was the same old Spock, all right, down to his unwavering expression and peaked aural receptors.

For his part, Spock's eyebrows made an upward leap of Olympian proportions. In fact, the science officer looked as

close to total befuddlement as Kirk could ever recall having seen him. The captain turned back to McCoy, mildly irritated. The excitement of their return had been stolen from him.

"What do you mean, 'Who's he?' You know Mr. Spock."

McCoy's nonchalant attitude and indifferent manner were much more shocking than his casual reply.

" 'Fraid I don't, Jim."

Spock's expression changed only slightly at that. Just the veriest hint, the merest touch of annoyance seeped through his otherwise stony visage.

Kirk, however, was much more expressive in his display of facial contortions. He started to speak further to McCoy, became aware of his imminent loss of self-control, and thought better of speaking just now. There was no point in getting upset, yet.

It was a practical joke. Yes, of course! Bones probably authored the whole thing himself. It would fall apart any minute, as soon as someone made a slip and said something relating to Spock. For now he would go along with the gag. He pulled out his communicator, flipped open the grid, and glanced over at Grey and Aleek-om.

"You've both concluded your observations, then?" Jan Grey sighed reluctantly. That was the most blatant show of emotion she had yet displayed. Maybe she had Vulcan blood.

"Sadly, yes, Captain. It was all too short, too brief. But yes, our work here is finished."

They all climbed back into the shuttle car. Kirk, Spock, and McCoy rode in silence while the three historians chattered in the back.

"We should stop before we depart and thank Dr. Vassily for her help and consideration," noted Aleek-om when they'd returned the car to its stall in the main hangar.

Erickson agreed. "Yes, by all means." He nodded vigorously. Kirk interposed a negative as he toyed with his open communicator. He'd put off calling the ship. Erickson's call to remain here longer woke him from idle daydreams.

"Why not, Captain?" The stout researcher was pouting. Then he smiled slyly. "That brandied tea, wasn't half bad, even if it was reconstituted."

"It's not the quality of the refreshments, Erickson. There's something else." Kirk looked around at the now curious faces.

At first they'd all stared with unconcealed fascination at Spock. Now they were studiously ignoring him. If this was a practical joke, then someone was carrying it off in style. Too much style. Kirk was starting to feel that any overtones of humor to the situation were becoming shaded in tones of black.

He activated the communicator. Anyone could beam freely up from the surface of the Time Planet. Getting *down* was the problem.

"Kirk to *Enterprise*."

"*Enterprise*," came a familiar voice with sharp vowel sounds. So Scotty was working with Chief Kyle on the transporter now. So much the better.

"Six to beam up, Scotty."

"Aye, sir."

Aleek-om had been thinking. Now he spoke delicately to Kirk.

"If you don't mind, Captain, I should like to remain here a while longer, to record and study some of the artifacts Dr. Vassily has unearthed. If we have some time before departure, that is." The Aurelian's expression was hopeful.

"Me too, Captain," added Jan Grey. Kirk nodded, turned to the other historian.

"How about you, Erickson?"

"Oh no, I'm satisfied. All I want to do is put my tapes in a big viewer and play them back. I was so busy recording and taking notes that I didn't have half a chance to enjoy the journey." His blissful look turned momentarily serious.

"But you've got to understand, Captain Kirk, that this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience for most historians. We can't hold you up." Aleek-om and Grey indicated agreement. "I know starship time is precious. But if my compatriots could have even a few additional minutes . . ."

"All right, all right." Kirk grinned, spoke into the communicator. "Cancel that, Scotty. Four only to come up. Myself, Mr—" he hesitated, "and the others."

The two historians who would remain a while longer thanked him profusely and then hurried off toward the reception station. They promised to be ready for transporter pickup at the first call from the orbiting *Enterprise*.

"All clear, Scotty. Bring us up."

"Aye, sir."

There was a familiar feeling of disorientation. The four figures dissolved into four roughly cylindrical columns of luminescent particles.

In the transporter room, Chief Engineer Scott personally handled the delicate task of transporting while Chief Transporter Kyle, himself a master at the job, watched admiringly. Those calloused, practiced hands operated the transporter controls even more smoothly than his own.

The first thing Kirk noticed when he regained sight was the startled expression on his chief engineer's face. The first thing he heard when he regained hearing was the startled tone of his chief engineer's voice.

"Captain—" Scott paused, unmistakably confused. "I was expecting two of the historians with you and Dr. McCoy. But a Vulcan—"

Kirk decided that was quite enough. If this was a practical joke, it was going too far.

"Explain yourself, Mr. Scott!" he snapped. Scott's mouth worked. His puzzlement seemed honest.

"S . . . sir?"

Kirk chewed at his lower lip and stepped out of the alcove, off the platform.

"I don't know what's going on here—but the first officer of this ship will be treated with respect!"

"Captain," came a strange voice from the elevator, "I assure you no one has ever treated me otherwise."

It was Kirk's turn to look dumbfounded.

His gaze snapped to the right. The humanoid who'd just brazenly laid claim to Spock's title walked easily into the room. He was an Andorian, clad in the blue shirt of starfleet science officer, and wearing the insignia of a full commander.

Like most Andorians he was slim, rather fragile-looking, and had the pale blue eyes and silver hair of most of his people. Kirk noticed the two slightly curved, flaring antennae which protruded from his forehead and ended in dull, round knobs. These were his organs of hearing. He had no shell-shaped ears as did human or Vulcan.

Where distance was involved the knobbed antennae had less range than other humanoid sensing organs, but they could pick up much higher and lower frequencies. The Andorian's slim build belied his agility and strength, characteristics which certain other races had learned about the hard way.

Kirk took a couple of steps towards this alien, and his jaw dropped in amazement. He looked the other up and down without fazing him, finally managed to blurt out his thoughts.

"Who the hell are you?" This time it was Dr. McCoy who replied, wryly.

"I thought sure you'd know Thelin by now, Jim. He's been your first officer for five years."

"Is something the matter, Captain?" queried the Andorian. His tones were soft, slightly accented. And he too seemed openly puzzled. Kirk could only stare at him.

Spock finally broke the silence, summing up both his own and Kirk's thoughts in his usual terse fashion.

"Captain, I have come to the conclusion that this is not a game."

"No—no," Kirk muttered. "I agree, Mr. Spock. But if it's a reality—and everyone else here seems to think it is—then what happened?" He stiffened.

"All right, I don't know what's going on here, but I'm going to get to the bottom of it! Spock, Mr. . . . Thelin. If you'll both come with me to the main briefing room. There's no point in upsetting anyone else on board," They started off.

"Me too, Captain?" asked Erickson. He had no real part in the problem, but if something was the matter with Spock—well, he'd formed enough of a friendship with the starship officers to at least be concerned.

"Yes, by all means, Mr. Erickson, join us."

II

The command briefing room was small, with a single free-formed table of dark mahoganylike wood from the forests of IandB dominating the center. Holographic portraits of various alien landscapes decorated the walls, along with a framed copy of the Federation charter, and there was a musical rain sculpture shifting and chiming softly in one corner.

The seats were also free-formed, lush and comfortable, but they could do little to ease the tenseness of the four humanoids who now sat in them.

Erickson immediately set to work with his tricorder, keeping his verbal requests to the machine to a whisper. He had thought about the unbelievable situation, and decided that maybe the compact instrument had noticed something significant they had not remembered.

"I will pass over the obvious, gentlemen," began Kirk. "I can think of only one explanation for what seems to have happened, and I'm sure it has occurred to you also.

"When we were in the time vortex, something happened to change the present as we know it. No one seems to recognize Mr. Spock. And neither he nor I nor Mr. Erickson recognizes Mr. Thelin. The only answer must be that the past was somehow altered when we were in it. Instead of emerging into our own time line, Mr. Spock, Mr. Erickson, and myself have reemerged into an alternate secondary one as a result of that as yet unidentified change." He paused for breath.

"And if that sounds confusing, gentlemen, I assure you it's a fit description of my present state of mind."

Erickson chose that moment to interrupt. He shook his head and looked disappointed.

"Nothing, Captain Kirk. I've just done a double-speed review of our entire journey. The tricorder has no record of anything we did while in the vortex that could conceivably have affected the future. *Any* future."

"Please, Mr. Erickson," requested Kirk. "I don't doubt your readings. But could you . . . try once more? Take all the time you need."

"I don't need any more time, Captain. I've done this sort of review a thousand times before." He shrugged, bent over the tricorder once more.

When he looked up again a while later, after completing the second run-through, the stocky historian found all eyes were on him. The sameness of his expression was eloquent.

"Nothing, Captain. I've even run down any changes in the atmospheric content while we were present, and there's absolutely nothing."

Kirk slammed a fist down on the smooth wood. One of these days he was going to break a hand doing that.

"But, dammit—*something* was changed!"

"It seems, Captain," interposed Spock easily, "that I am the only one affected. The mission, the ship, the crew—except for myself—remain the same."

"Not entirely, Mr. Spock," Kirk countered. "I still know who you are. So does Erickson." The historian nodded vigorously. "But no one else aboard does. While we were in Orion's past, the time revision that apparently occurred here didn't affect us." He looked thoughtful. "I wonder how extensive it is?"

"If you'll pardon me, Jim," began Thelin. Then he smiled faintly, uncomfortably. "Captain, I might be able to answer that. While we were on our way down here, I took the liberty of placing an informational request with the library. It should tell us how complete the time change has been."

"I didn't hear you put in any request, Mr. Thelin."

"You were in deep conversation with Mr. . . . Spock, at the time," the Andorian replied.

As if on cue, the bosun's whistle sounded in the room. Thelin looked pleased.

"That ought to be the reply now." Kirk pressed a half-hidden switch under the rim of the table. A three-sided viewer popped up from the center of the dark wood. He hit another switch.

"Kirk here."

The picture of a young, neatly turned-out ensign appeared on the three screens. The ensign started to speak, but Kirk waved him off.

"Just a minute, Ensign." He turned to Spock. "You know who that is, Mr. Spock?"

"Ensign Bates, Captain. Inexperienced, but studious, well-intentioned, reasonably efficient. Graduated OTS Starfleet with high honors but not the highest. Served one year apprenticeship on the shuttle tender SCOPUS. Transferred to *Enterprise* starda . . ."

"That'll do, Spock." Kirk looked satisfied.

"That would approximate my own evaluation of Bates' abilities at this stage, Captain," Thelin added casually. "Transferred to *Enterprise* stardate 5365.6."

"Ummm." Kirk's tone was noncommittal. He directed his attention back to the screen. "What have you got for us, Ensign?"

"Sir, we've checked Starfleet records as Commander Thelin requested."

Even though he thought he was growing used to the present impossible situation, Kirk still gave a little mental jump every time he heard the Andorian referred to by his own crew as "Commander Thelin." Deep down he knew that—in the original time line, at least—the Andorian didn't really exist.

Or was *this* the real time line, and the other merely a secondary copy? One problem at a time . . .

Yet McCoy, Scotty—everyone—seemed to know Thelin intimately, and not Mr. Spock.

He blinked, remembered Bates. The ensign was patiently awaiting Kirk's orders to report the researched material, destroy it, stand on his head, play dead, or do *something*.

"Findings, Ensign?" he said crisply. The ensign's reply had the directness of truth.

"There is no Vulcan named Spock listed with Starfleet in any capacity, sir. Neither as commander, nor cook—no listing whatsoever."

Spock's only visible reaction was the moderate ascension of one eyebrow.

"I see," Kirk muttered. He thought a moment, then, "You have your visual pickup on?"

"Of course, Captain. I was not told this was to be a closed meetin . . ."

"No, no, it's not. Relax, Ensign. Now, can you see the Vulcan sitting to my immediate right?" Bates' head and eyes moved. He showed no reaction.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you recognize him?"

"No, sir," responded Bates, who was one of Spock's regular science-library assistants. "I've never seen him before in my life."

Thelin leaned forward and addressed the screen. "Did you also research the Vulcan family history requested?"

"Yes, Commander," said the ensign crisply. "There are some related visual materials. I can put them on the viewer pickup, if you wish."

"We so wish, Ensign," Kirk ordered. Bates hit a button below screen pickup level and his image vanished, to be replaced immediately by a still hologram of a distinguished-looking male Vulcan clad in formal ambassadorial attire. Bates continued to speak.

"This is Sarek of Vulcan, ambassador to seventeen Federation planets in the past thirty t-standard years."

Spock broke into the Ensign's speech. "That is not correct."

Kirk only grinned sardonically.

"In this case—or this time, Mr. Spock—it seems that it is." Spock gave a slight nod of understanding and looked back to the tripartite viewer.

"I wish to ask a question."

"Yes, Commander?" Bates might not know Spock, but he could still recognize the uniform and rank of a starship commander, even if not his own.

"What of Sarek's family? His wife and son?"

The picture of Sarek disappeared, to be replaced by another hologram. This one was of a lovely human woman in her early thirties. She was fair-haired and slim, delicate—one of those rare women who you know instantly will retain her

youthfulness well into old age. The young officer's voice—impersonal voice, doom voice, continued—

"Amanda, wife of Sarek, known on Earth as Amanda Grayson." Kirk gave Spock a sympathetic look as Bates droned on. "The couple separated after the death of their son."

That finally drew a visible reaction from Spock, though, as Kirk knew, ninety percent of it was still bound up tightly inside his first officer. Bates continued.

"The wife was killed in a shuttle accident at Lunaport, on her way home to Earth. Ambassador Sarek has not remarried."

Everyone was watching Spock now, and he was watching none of them. His eyes remained glued to the picture on the screen. When he finally did speak, there was a pause, a bare hint of a catch in his voice that could have been—no, ridiculous.

"My mother—" he whispered softly. Then he spoke—well, almost normally. There was no uncertainty in his tone, only a desire to satisfy perverse curiosity to the utmost, to draw out the thing to its ultimate mad conclusion.

"The son—what was his name and age when he died?"

"Spock," came Bates reply. "Age . . ." he seemed to be checking some off-screen reference, ". . . age seven."

"Sympathy is not among my race's primary traits, Mr. Spock," said Thelin, "but I believe I can understand a little of what you are feeling now. I'm sorry, truly I am." He gave the Andorian equivalent of a shrug. "But I am me and you are you, and there is nothing to be done for it."

"Not in this time line, no," mused Kirk.

"You are, of course, correct, Captain," Spock added. "But if we didn't change anything in the past—"

"We didn't!" insisted Erickson. "We didn't!" Suddenly his forehead creased and he repeated, softly this time,

"We didn't!" insisted Erickson. "We didn't!" Suddenly,

"Of course! Jan and Loom!"

"Surely," said Spock, "they didn't enter the Guardian while we were in the vortex?"

"No, no!" Erickson was nervous as a mouse. "They would never do a thing as potentially dangerous as that. But scanning—they must have been scanning! We might at least get some useful information from them if they . . ."

". . . were looking into my past while we were in Orion's. Yes, I see what you are leading toward, Historian." Spock rose, looked at Kirk.

"Captain, we must go down to the Guardian again. And as quickly as possible. The longer we stay in this time line, the stronger our position here grows, and the less chance we have of returning to and correcting our own—my own."

"Certainly, Spock. Erickson, come on!" The four rose and left the briefing room.

"You're sure you don't recognize him?" Kirk asked Scott when they'd returned to the transporter room. They were mounting the transporter platform prior to beam-down. Scott studied Spock carefully, indifferently, and shook his head.

"There are few Vulcans on the *Enterprise*, Captain. I'm not likely to forget any, let alone a commander."

"Thanks, Scotty. Beam us down, please."

On the way back to the Guardian in the ground car, they tried to explain the situation to Grey and Aleek-om. Since Kirk was still confused himself, he wasn't sure they made things much clearer to the two historians who had remained behind. But they seemed to grasp the idea behind what had happened better than he had. Time was their business, space was his.

Of course, neither of them recognized Mr. Spock. And both seemed to know Thelin. The Andorian had insisted on coming along, as was his privilege both as commander and science officer.

By the time they had returned to the quiescent Guardian of Forever, mutual agreement had reached on an approximation of sequential probabilities. Nevertheless, Kirk continued to examine every salient fact with the three historians as they all made their way toward the Guardian. As always, the Time Gate was modest in appearance, overwhelming in capabilities.

Glowing cream-colored mists flowed and danced patiently, languorously in the central hollow, oblivious to the petty

problems of the small knot of approaching humanoids.

"If we didn't change anything while we were in the time vortex," Kirk insisted, "someone or something else must have." He turned to Aleek-om and then Grey. "You were using the Guardian while we were gone."

"Yes, but it was nothing unusual," said Grey matter-of-factly. "We were merely scanning occasional sequences of recent history."

"Any recent Vulcan history?" asked Kirk.

"Why, yes!" She smiled in sudden realization. "I see the way your thoughts have been going, Captain. I don't see what we might have done, but—of course it seems the only other possibility."

"What time period?" asked Spock as they mounted the last step leading towards the Gate.

"I'm not sure." She fumbled with the omnipresent tricorder. "Just a moment . . ." A quick recheck provided the desired information. "No specific dates listed—approximately twenty to thirty Vulcan years past." Kirk had a sudden thought. His question beat Spock's by a few seconds.

"Was there any notation recorded on the death of the son of a Vulcan ambassador named Sarek and his human wife?" Both historians looked thoughtful, glanced at each other before turning back to Kirk and Spock.

"I don't recall any, but there was so much, information—" Aleek-om looked a little tense as he worked his own tricorder. Thin powerful claws clicked over the sensitive controls, too fine for any human to manipulate. It hummed softly, then stopped.

Aleek-om jabbed a recessed switch, ran something back and played through it more slowly. The hum deepened. He stopped again and nodded, his crest bobbing and dancing in the dry desert breeze.

"*Cher-wit!* Yes, the death is indeed recorded."

"How . . ." Kirk all but choked on the peculiar-sounding words, "how did he die?" He still found it hard to believe he was living this nightmare. It was no consolation to know that it must be a hundred times worse for Spock.

Again, Aleek-om checked the instrument readings.

"The child is recorded as dying during some form of . . . maturity test. Yes, that's it. It is recorded only because the father was a notable figure in government and in Federation history."

Spock spoke absently. "The Kahs-wan—a survival test for young males. It is traditional, a holdover from less peaceful, less civilized days."

"The death is recorded as—" Aleek-om continued, but Spock finished it for him.

". . . falling on the twentieth day of Tasmeen." All but Kirk and Erickson looked at Spock in surprise.

"How do you know this?" asked Thelin. Spock paused, spoke slowly.

"That was the day my—my cousin saved my life when I was attacked in the desert by a wild animal."

But how could Spock know that that was the particular day and that that incident was crucial?

Inspiration hit Kirk then, without warning—at warp-eight speed.

"This cousin, Spock, what was his name?" Spock frowned, shifted his position on the rocky surface underfoot.

"That I do not seem to recall clearly. I was very young. He called himself—yes, Selek. A common enough name in my father's family. He was visiting us." Spock frowned slightly. "Odd, but I never saw him again after that—though I wished to, many times. Nor, I believe, did any of my family." The frown grew deeper.

"Captain, your expression, I believe you . . ." Spock seemed to hesitate.

Kirk looked directly at his first officer. Inside, Spock *knew*. But he was so close to the answer that it hadn't yet come to him.

"Spock—this Selek—did he by any chance look like you do . . . now?"

Even then, Spock was reluctant to accept the idea. Alternative lines of possibility, however, suddenly looked more barren than ever. He nodded slowly.

"I believe he did, Captain. And I see what you are thinking. That other time, it wasn't my 'cousin' who saved me—it was I. I saved myself."

"But this time," continued Kirk, pushing the thought forward, "you were in Orion's past with Mr. Erickson and me. At the same time, Aleek-om and Grey were here, playing back that section of Vulcan history. You couldn't exist in two time lines simultaneously, so you had to vanish from one of them. In other words, you had to die as a boy, since you couldn't be there to save yourself." He shook his head. Much more thinking along paradoxical lines like that and they'd all be candidates for the silly station. He spun to face the Gate.

"Guardian, did you hear that?"

The shifting colors seemed to flow a little faster, shine a touch brighter. When it spoke, the colors pulsed with internal light as each syllable was intoned. The words themselves were, as always, neither masculine nor feminine nor even machinelike—but instead a kind of strange sexless and timeless neuter.

"I HEAR ALL."

"We could resort to the *Enterprise*'s computers," Kirk murmured, as much to himself as to the Gate, "but in all the Universe, no one, nothing, knows as much about time as you. Tell me—is it possible for Spock the Vulcan to return to the period when he was not (God, this was insane!) and repair the broken time line so that all is the same as it was before our last journey?"

A pause, then, "IT IS POSSIBLE," the Guardian boomed indifferently, "IF NO OTHER MAJOR FACTOR HAS BEEN CHANGED. OR IS CHANGED IN THE CHANGING."

Kirk turned to his science officer.

"Do you remember enough, Spock? You heard the Guardian. You can't risk changing anything when you go back. You've got to repeat what happened when you were seven years old."

Spock shook his head slowly, the strain of recall showing plainly.

"I do not remember everything, Captain. There are vague memories, from a child's point of view. But as is common to

youthful memories, a child's details are blurred and run together. The memory *is* there—but slightly out of focus."

"You'll have to try!" Kirk insisted. "For you—and your mother—to live." Spock nodded slowly, considering.

"Yes. I will need the following items: a Vulcan desert soft-suit and boots, and a small selection of plain street-wear accessories circa—8877 Vulcan years. The matching obligatory carry-bag should be of the same period and look well used."

"You've got them," nodded Kirk quickly. "I'll have quartermaster section, drop whatever they're doing and run them off now." He flipped open his communicator and moved slightly to one side. The three historians were already engaged in animated discussion of what had become for them a fascinating socio-mathematical exercise in conflicting time lines.

This curiosity was touched with tragedy only for Erickson, since among the arguing historians only he had been intimately involved with the actual expedition into Orion's past. But his academic concern outweighed the desire to offer further consolation to Spock. He wasn't very good at such things, anyway.

That left Spock alone with his quiet doppelganger—Thelin. The Andorian studied him closely.

"This proposed modification of time lines will put you in my place on a different plane . . . replace another Thelin somewhere." He paused. "Yet, I am not aggrieved."

"Andorians are noted for many things," said Spock conversationally. "However, as you yourself admitted, sympathy is not one of them."

"True," Thelin nodded. "A warrior race has few sympathies and little time for same. Yet it is not a normal situation we find ourselves in. I, personally, do not feel threatened. Yet, in a way, I am actually contributing to the murder of a distant cousin."

"Who should not be there in the first place," concluded Spock evenly.

"Perhaps. Yet one empathy we Andorians do possess is for family. On this time plane, you will lose—and so would your

mother. The knowledge that this will be prevented, at least, is acceptable mental compensation for me."

He gave Spock a smart Vulcan hand salute. "Live long and prosper in your own world, Commander Spock—in your own time." Spock returned the salute.

"And you in yours, Commander Thelin."

There was nothing to do now but wait for Spock's requested clothing and materials to be sent down from the *Enterprise*. There'd be no problem there—planetary defenses could recognize the difference between a suit of clothes and a photon torpedo. But it left them with nothing to do but think, and after a while that wasn't too comfortable for the historians, either.

The little group spent several nervous, awkward minutes wandering around the base of the now familiar Guardian. Kirk studied it idly.

Certainly it possessed some strange unknown variety of organic/inorganic intelligence—witness its answers to questions in many languages. But no one knew if this intelligence lay dormant until evoked. Might it not be always alert, constantly observing? Was it even now looking down on them from some uncomprehensible alien Olympus and musing on their problems? He could ask, of course.

But the Guardian of Forever did not deign to answer any questions about anything but time.

As for other sights to study, they were too far from Oyya for the city's ancient and distant attractions to hold their interest for very long. The area around the Guardian itself was singularly barren.

Even the Time Gate was beginning to seem like no more than a pile of oddly hewn rocks and stone by the time a small transporter effect, a chromatic glow of atomic action, began to take shape nearby. As it faded, the glow congealed into the form of a Vulcan carry-all bag, a small pile of goods and knickknacks, boots, and a neatly tied bundle of sand-colored clothes.

"Nice to know that the crew in this time plane is efficient, too," Kirk commented appreciatively. He hesitated, then held out a hand to Spock. Words were unnecessary.

It took Spock a few moments to make the change of clothing. He stacked his uniform and boots neatly to one side, then turned and moved away from them, walking up to the base of the Gate itself.

Thelin moved to stand next to Kirk. Not wont to miss even a blurred glimpse of what might take place, the three historians activated their own special tricorders. Spock's voice as he addressed the enigmatic intelligence known as the Guardian was clear and precise, as always.

"I wish to visit the planet Vulcan."

"TIME?" rumbled the Guardian.

"Thirty Vulcan years past, the month of Tasmeen, before—before the twentieth day."

There, that ought to provide a reasonable margin of time in which to get reacquainted with himself.

"LOCATION?"

"Just outside the border city of ShiKahr."

By way of reply, the pastel mists that filled the circular Gate started to swirl and boil, flowing slower and slower, until the blur of time pictures began to steady as the Guardian locked in to the requested time line. Then, abruptly, the Gate was filled with a view so familiar to Spock that it immediately relaxed all inner tensions.

A hot, dry, orange world—Vulcan.

"Yes," was all Kirk heard him say—though there seemed to be other words, voiced too low to be understood.

"TIME AND PLACE," the Guardian shouted in tones as stable and final as the Universe, "ARE READY TO RECEIVE YOU."

"Yes," Spock murmured again. One word worth a thousand pictures. Then he was running, running forward, and taking a short leap into the time portal.

His body faded from view as though he were slipping into a transparent sponge. As soon as he touched the field, the picture began to blur from the temporary distortion of the time vortex.

For several moments after he'd vanished, Kirk stood staring at the now resumed blur of time-patterns racing across the Gate. Then he turned to one side, where the blue uniform of

a Starfleet commander, science section, and a pair of boots—Starfleet standard issue, officer's—lay on the broken gravel, awaiting their owner's return.

In another, unknown time line, another James T. Kirk was staring at another set of clothes, thinking the same thoughts, hoping the same hopes. And on a different line, perhaps, yet a different Kirk. And another, and another—an infinitude of Kirks waiting for the return of a billion Spocks in a million variations of a certain awkward second or two in time . . .

Spock stood on the sands of the world of his birth. Behind him, the land was desert, painted in harsh ochre-yellows and umber-browns—spotted only reluctantly here and there by an occasional winsome patch of greenery.

Further back, a range of forbidding black mountains clawed at the sky with great ragged talons of granite, basalt, and gneiss. The thin atmosphere inspired a roof of flinty orange-red instead of the soft blues of Earth. But the clouds that spotted it were just as cottony white.

Before him lay the city of ShiKahr, like a neat, orderly oasis in the wastes. A wide band of lush, landscaped parkland formed a civilizing barrier between urban environment and raw, arid sands. Flowers and other vegetation tended toward soft, warm hues of yellow and brown, with a few isolated sprinklings of pink or purple.

The park buffer zone was as modern as the rest of ShiKahr, which nevertheless was an old city. Buildings were geometric, regular, and aesthetically as well as architecturally sound. A logical city designed for relentlessly logical inhabitants.

A person standing next to Spock at that moment might have heard him mutter something vaguely like, "thirty years . . ." Or it might have been the wind rippling through a desert bush.

In any case, no one could have stood close enough to see what was going through Spock's mind. That mind was considering. From here on, he was quite aware that his very continued existence depended on repeating with as much precision as possible events he could barely remember. Events that had taken place thirty years ago—now.

He shifted the carry-bag higher on his shoulder, ran his right thumb underneath the strap, and started off towards the city. At the city gate he experienced an instant of apprehension. There was always an outside chance that something else about him, something unseen but vital, had been altered by the interlocution of time lines.

If the automatic sentry defense systems which were designed to keep out fierce desert carnivores sensed anything suspicious about him, he would be, not killed, but immobilized and held helplessly tranquillized until the arrival of a detention squad from the city reasoning force.

That wouldn't be fatal. But subsequent questions and examinations could be embarrassing as well as time delaying. At the very least, serious alterations in this time line might be produced. That could jumble matters beyond repair.

They might be damaged beyond change already, but there was little benefit to that line of thought. Besides, it was very depressing.

He needn't have worried. Unseen radiation probed him, hidden sensors clucked approving mechanical tongues. His shape and composition were familiar—Vulcan. No challenge was offered as he walked through the park. No tranquillizing darts *phocked* out at him, no stun rays sought to bar his passage.

He experienced no difficulties whatsoever. His only barrier to progress was confusion of a mental variety. He'd forgotten the beauty of ShiKahr. The calm efficiency and palpable sense of security that made a Vulcan city so different from the hectic, albeit exciting urban hodgepodges of so many other humanoid worlds.

He passed by the last of the flowers, past a gentle fountain that dispensed a constant stream of fresh well water, and suddenly found himself on a walking street.

This pathway was broad and paved, but designed for pedestrian use only. It was quiet and tree-shaded. Every effort —every stone, every bush, all but the actual placement of the leaves on the branches—was predesigned and executed to enhance one's serene appreciation of podal locomotion.

High walls kept homes and gardens discreetly secluded from passersby. Delicate symmetrical blossoms on creeping

vines trailed over many of the stone walls and brightened the rustic scene even further. There was a main artery in the distance ahead, busy with ground-car activity. Old-style, outmoded ground-cars, he noted.

That mechanical sound was distant. But soon, another clamor reached his ears. A group of young voices—male. Their tone was biting and sarcastic—a near-emotion to which even Vulcan youth were not immune. The words matched the tone of delivery.

"Barbarian . . . Earther . . . throwback . . . emotional, squalling, uncontrolled *Earther!*"

He'd heard those same insults long ago, it seemed. Surprising how painful they could still be, after all those years. He moved to a corner, turned it, and looked ahead.

A high wall fronted on an intersection of several small pathways. He moved a few steps further, halting in front of a high, solid old gate of polished, engraved wood. Nearby, another lower gateway led to a flourishing garden. In front of this second gate stood a very young version of himself.

There was no question of who it was. Inwardly, he'd dreaded this moment—from an intellectual, not an emotional, standpoint. How would he react to the first sight of . . . himself? Kirk had equated it to an old terran expression—being "on the outside looking in." Now that Spock was actually confronted with the experience, the result proved anticlimactic.

There was no abrupt sundering of mind, no shattering of preconceived images. No, no emotional damage. This younger, smaller version of himself was only a young boy who looked somehow familiar. But another person entirely.

After all, he'd met a universe full of aliens—and to an adult, children are often the most alien of all.

He blinked. Three other Vulcan youngsters stood in front of young Spock, taunting him. Old memories came drifting back, long-lost little pains that made small wrenching tugs deep in his mind.

That one, there, with the light-colored hair—that must be Stark. Then Sofek, next to him, and the tallest one standing between them had to be Sepek—a persistent childhood

tormentor until later years, when they grew to become great friends.

But for now . . .

"You're a terran, Spock," shouted Stark. "You could never be a true Vulcan."

"That's not true!" yelled young Spock in reply, barely managing to keep a grip on his temper. "My father . . ."

Sepek's reply touched each noun, each syllable, with contempt.

"Terran! Your father brought shame to Vulcan! Marrying an Earther wom—"

That was more than enough for young Spock. Sadly, his physical reaction was more emotional than reasoned. He rushed forward blindly, arms flailing, to crush and rend his tormentors. Old Spock's first reaction was to observe that one against three—with one of the three much older, heavier, and more experienced—was an illogical arrangement to aggravate. Not to mention an unnecessary one.

But he'd been different as a youngster. Now the rather astonishing emotional outbursts of childhood rushed back to him. Had he really been so ready to react belligerently to mere words? Had he actually been so impulsive, so blind, so—so emotional? There was no denying the evidence of his eyes.

Any last concerns he might have felt about meeting his younger self disappeared. The child really was a different person.

Any mother could have told him that.

Sepek the nearest and strongest, easily dodged young Spock's blind, angry punch. Sepek deftly tripped him backwards while avoiding the clumsy grab. Young Spock landed unceremoniously on his backside in the smooth dirt.

He didn't appear to be hurt—not physically, anyway. Sepek's voice dripped contempt.

"You haven't even mastered a simple Vulcan neck pinch yet!" he said nastily, concluding with the ultimate insult, "Earther!" The three youths walked quietly away.

Young Spock sat there in the settling dust, alone and insulted and hurt, obviously trying to keep control of himself. Alas, he failed in this, too. Scrambling to his feet, he dashed

into the nearby garden enclosure and slammed the gate heavily behind him.

He didn't even have the satisfaction of a terran child, of hearing a loud slam behind him. The garden was designed as a place of peace and contemplation. The cushioned gate hinges automatically absorbed the shock of closing and snapped shut with a quiet click.

Spock remained standing quietly across the way, watching the direction his departing younger self had taken in disappearing among the thick vegetation. That green domesticated jungle had been his favorite place of hiding and solace as a boy.

This had been only one of many similar difficult moments in his childhood. It was not as painful to watch as it had been to live, but it was hard nonetheless.

"My apologies, visitor," came an unexpected voice—a deceptively quiet, unhurried, immensely powerful voice that he'd recognize anywhere. A voice that could impress whole worlds—or little boys. A second was sufficient time for him to compose himself. Then he turned, carefully keeping his expression open and receptive.

III

Sarek of Vulcan stood opposite him, looking very much like the familiar picture Spock had seen earlier on the small triple screen in the command conference room. The only immediately obvious difference was that this living version had far less grey in his hair and eyebrows, far fewer age lines in his forehead and around the eyes.

A tall, broad-shouldered Vulcan he was, perhaps no athlete but in fine physical trim. He had sharply planed, strong features and deep-set eyes. Altogether an attractive man. An older, tauter, more severe version of Spock.

Spock calculated rapidly. His father should now be seventy-three standard years old, in the prime of Vulcan life. He wore the sandy-hued, neutral clothing Spock remembered so well. No loud shirts or bold prints for him! It was brightened only by a single spot of color, the adhesive badge of his office.

"I regret you were witness to that unfortunate display of emotion on the part of my son."

If there was any lingering hesitation in Spock's mind as to the identity of this man, that brief, so-typical phrase instantly dispelled it. This was Sarek, all right. Spock raised his hand in salute.

"In the family, all is silence. Especially the indiscretions of children. No more will be said of it. Live long and prosper, Sarek of Vulcan." The ambassador hesitated for a second before returning the salute.

"Peace and long life." Then he spoke uncertainly while studying Spock with understandable puzzlement. "You are of my family?"

"A distant relative. My name is—" He paused. It wouldn't do to give an easily recognizable false name, here. "—Selek. A humble cousin, descendant of T'pal and Sessek. I . . . am journeying to the family shrine in Dycoon to honor our ancestors." There, that was a plausible reason for traveling the way he was. "Family is family, and I thought to give greeting to you on my passing."

Sarek nodded approvingly. "A pilgrimage, then?"

"Even so."

"You have a long way to go. Will you interrupt your journey to remain with us awhile, cousin?"

"I have already come quite a distance, and in good time," Spock murmured. "I have a little time to spare. I would be honored." He dipped his eyes, uncomfortably aware of Sarek's unwavering, intense stare. There was nothing he could do but try to ignore it.

"Is something wrong, cousin?" Spock asked. Sarek seemed to return from a region of far thoughts, formless musings.

"No, no. It was only that I seem to . . . know you. To have met you before."

The best defense, Spock reflected, was a fast retreat through forward enemy positions.

"I, too," he countered, "have been struck by the physical resemblance between us. A common ancestor among our forefathers, no doubt."

"No doubt," agreed Sarek quietly. Then, as though suddenly remembering that to continue such a line of inquiry with a strange relative would have been impolite, "Well, come then. Allow me to welcome you to my home."

He turned and opened the beautifully carved gate behind them. Familiar, so familiar, was the interior of the house! Spock tried not to let his eyes stray overmuch. Everything was as he remembered it, everything fit so comfortably in his mind.

Except that most everything was just slightly smaller.

Sarek indicated a well-stuffed lounge of a type no longer made—there seemed to be few craftsmen left anymore—and then a nearby mechanical servitor. Spock eyed the quaint antique and tried not to feel superior. There were so many things he could tell his father, if only . . .

No. Impossible. Forget it.

"A place to rest and comfort yourself, cousin. Refreshments at hand, if you thirst. Excuse me. I shall return shortly. I have . . . an errand to perform. Meanwhile, my house is yours." He walked out of the room. Spock had a fair idea of the nature of his father's "errand."

Young Spock had buried himself against a shaggy wall of fur. He *might* have been crying, though it would have been difficult for an observer to tell. There was no sound.

The wall of fur filled out to north and south, completing the form of the youngster's pet sehlat, Ee-chiya. The sehlat looked rather like a cross between a lion and a giant panda, with a pair of downward projecting, ten-centimeter long fangs. It was fluffy, but not cute.

A temperamental sehlat would have been a poor choice of pet for a young human. But for the logical, never cruel or brutal Vulcan child, he was ideal—loving, intelligent and protective, as well as fiercely loyal.

This particular sehlat had a brown coat faded in spots to patches of pale beige. One of the worn, yellowed fangs was broken off at the tip, and there were other indications of the creature's advanced age.

Young Spock heard his father enter the garden, but he didn't look up from the massive flank.

"Spock . . ."

The boy slowly detached himself from the warm haven of Ee-chiya's furry side. He knew his father wouldn't repeat himself. He got slowly to his feet and shuffled over, presenting himself to his father in the traditional attitude of youthful respect—back straight, chin out, hands clasped firmly behind his back.

Sarek stood, looking down at his son for a moment, and then shook his head slightly, sadly. His voice was soft, but the words were not.

"Spock, being Vulcan means following disciplines and philosophies that are difficult and demanding of both mind and body. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Father."

"Your schoolwork has been disgraceful. You constantly display your emotions in public. You've even been seen fighting in the street, and your attitude in such conflicts is reported to have been somewhat less than experimentally martial." A hint of defiance crept into the youth's voice.

"Personal combat for a worthy cause is not dishonorable."

Inwardly, the reply pleased Sarek. However, the situation was serious. It could no longer be put off. This was not the time or place for him to express appreciation for such a sentiment.

"Brawling like a common deckhand off an alien freighter is not." Young Spock lowered his head.

"Yes, Father."

Sarek took a deep breath, paused, then continued more firmly.

"The time draws near when you will be forced to decide whether you'll follow Vulcan or human philosophies. Vulcan offers much. No war, no crime, with logic and reasoned guidance operating in place of raw emotion and unbridled passion. Once on the path you choose, you cannot turn back.

"Yes, Father."

Sarek lifted his gaze briefly, in a tiny display of disgust. That constant, meek "yes, Father" was beginning to annoy him. Perhaps he'd been, not too easy, but firm with the boy in the wrong ways.

Spock finished his drink and looked around the comfortable room. Still no sign of Sarek returning. He noticed old touches of Amanda's Earthwoman's influence—a cascade of brilliant blue flowers pouring over a flowerbox built into a wall. A dizzyingly colorful afghan tossed casually across a chair-back.

And the books—especially the books, on the shelves. Real books, to handle and read, not to be flashed and turned on by a dial on an electronic reader-viewer. He smiled inwardly. For those, at least, his childhood associates had envied him.

Impractical they might seem to many adult Vulcans, but they brought back a thrill of pride and memories to him. There was something about having the words there, in your hand. Any page, any chapter, at your personal beck and call—instead of having to plead for them through an electronic middleman.

He rose and walked to the large, open door that faced into part of the lush garden. Distantly, he could hear faint sounds of conversation between his father and his younger self, engaged in some deep discussion.

There had been many such discussions.

A soft, shocking voice made him whirl.

"I hope you were not disturbed by my son's behavior, cousin Selek."

Amanda stood there, even more beautiful than her picture, more lovely than any memory. Intelligent, gentle, and gracious. For the first time, he could admire her as a woman in the prime of her life, instead of as a boy seeing his mother.

And more than any other quality, he remembered, far more than beauty or wisdom—her constant understanding. Understanding for the ordeal of his childhood.

"No, my lady Amanda." He didn't even think the word "mother." This was one meeting he'd prepared for well and one mistake he was determined not to make. "Any child has much to learn. My young cousin has a more difficult road to travel than most others."

Now it was Amanda's turn to study him closely.

"You seem to understand him better than my husband."

Careful now! Sarek you could err with and cover up, but one slip with this woman and there would be trouble. She would not fool so easily.

"It is difficult for a father to bear less than perfection in his son. Spock will find a way, I suspect—his way." His mother looked anxious. He'd succeeded in diverting attention back to her son—from her son.

"I do hope so. I respect Vulcan and all its traditions, or I would not have married Sarek, but it's such a demanding life. It's hard enough on a young boy, without the added—complications my son must endure." The conversation was getting to be too painful for Spock.

"The boy appears to be of a certain age. He goes through the Kahs-wan ordeal soon, does he not?"

Amanda nodded. "Next month."

Visions of catastrophe, of a helix of mad time lines meeting in a common crazed center and dissolving into chaos, sprang into Spock's mind.

"Next . . . month?" He couldn't keep all the confusion and puzzlement out of his voice. "But tomorrow, tomorrow *is* the

twentieth day of Tasmeen?" His mother looked up at him, disturbed a little by his controlled intensity.

"Yes, it is." That was reassuring, at least! The universe had not gone completely insane—though something was very, very wrong. "Is something the matter, cousin Selek?" Spock struggled to regain his composure.

"I've been traveling for quite awhile. I seem to have lost track of time."

". . . And that is all I have to say on the subject, for now," Sarek concluded. "Soon you will undergo your test of manhood, in the Kahs-wan. To survive for ten days without food, water, or weapons on Vulcan's Forge—as our human associates have so quaintly renamed the Sas-a-shar desert.

"It will demand more of you than anything else ever has. To fail once is not unusual, nor is it a disgrace—for others." Young Spock lowered his eyes again, studied the ground. But his father wasn't through.

"If you fail, there will be those who will nevertheless call you coward all your life." These last words rang like steel being hammered out on a Vulcanian forge of another type. That stentorian tone had been employed more than once for the glory of all Vulcan, in interstellar diplomacy. The tone was not softened for delivery from father to son.

"I do not expect you to fail."

Young Spock considered and looked up. "What if I do, father?"

Sarek could not admit to himself that there was anything so alien as emotion swirling through his mind.

"There is no need to ask that question. You will not disappoint me. You will not disappoint—yourself. Not if your heart and spirit are Vulcan."

He turned abruptly and walked back toward the house, leaving the youngster standing alone amid the silently watching blooms, the eloquent ferns. A few pebbles were lightly kicked by a small foot, a little earth disturbed.

Then he turned to the sehlat. The big mammal had dozed somnolently through the entire discussion, oblivious to the

verbalizations of father and son. Now it stirred as his young master sat down beside him.

"Ee-chiya, what if I'm not a true Vulcan, like they say? What if Sepek and the others are right?"

The sehlat was not that intelligent. It did not understand. But it was sensitive to emotions. It snuffled and nudged nearer the boy, edging close in rough affection. Young Spock put his arms around as much of the massive neck as he could and hugged hard.

Spock maintained his own cover with near perfection throughout the rest of the day. He always managed to produce a plausible answer to any question Sarek or Amanda might pose, to turn awkward lines of inquiry neatly into other channels. It was a performance worthy of a diplomat's son.

He'd passed a pleasant, no, an ecstatic day, reliving the company of a younger mother and father, able to enjoy them as equals, to respond to them on entirely different yet equally gratifying levels.

He committed his one potentially serious error well after the sun had vanished below the horizon.

Sleep-time approached. As the guest, it was his place to mention such.

"I have had a long, full day, cousin Sarek, and your hospitality has been spoiling. I find myself more than ready for sleep." Sarek and Amanda both rose.

"Rest well, cousin," said Sarek. "We shall talk more tomorrow. I have enjoyed our evening immensely."

"It is the highlight of my journey, cousin Sarek," replied Spock, adding with an unseen smile, "perhaps I may remind you of it again some day."

Sarek looked at him oddly for a moment, then nodded politely. Amanda gestured, and Spock started to follow her towards the bedrooms. He almost turned in the direction of his own—young Spock's—room.

Fortunately, it was dark in the hallway and Amanda hadn't noticed the motion. He was barely able to recover before she glanced back at him.

She seemed willing to talk further at the door to the guest room, but he made further excuses of exhaustion. Too much close contact in the sometimes revealing dimness of evening might lead to unwanted questions.

He then attended to matters of Vulcan hygiene, enjoying once more the use of the interesting, old-fashioned washroom facilities. Then he returned to the guest room and turned on the single overhead light.

There was a lock on the door, but for a relative, a guest in another's house, to have bolted it would have been inexcusably bad manners. So, of course, would be the unannounced entrance of any member of the household. Still, he would have felt better with it bolted. He'd have to chance leaving it open. The single shuttered window he didn't worry about.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed he brought out his carry-bag. The little tricorder that came from it was far too modern and compact. The sleepwear he now wore was thirty years old, a simple garment of pale yellow worn like a loose toga.

One last time he considered locking the door, but discarded the idea. Instead he turned on the bed and put his back to it, shielding the potentially embarrassing tricorder with his body. And while recording, he kept his voice low. A passerby in the hall would have to strain to hear him and press an ear to the door to make any sense of what he said.

"Personal log, stardate 5373.9, subjective time.

"The time line seems to have changed once more, yet I cannot discover on thinking back anything I have done that might have affected it. My memory is quite clear regarding the actual day my cousin saved my life. That day is tomorrow." Then, as much to refresh his own memory as to provide information for future listeners:

"The Kahs-wan is an ancient rite of Vulcan's warrior days. When Vulcans turned to logic as the ruling element of their lives, they reasoned that it was necessary to maintain the old tests of strength and courage. Otherwise devotion to pure reason might make them grow weak and incapable of defending themselves from barbarians who might be less advanced mentally and socially.

"This, in itself, was of course a logical decision."

The house was very quiet. There was no pedestrian traffic on the surrounding pathways this late at night.

A door opened quietly in the rear of the house, and a very small, very young figure crept out. Young Spock was dressed in a desert soft-suit and boots. He closed the door carefully behind him and surveyed the area cautiously before moving any further out.

He took a couple of steps into the garden. There was a rustling sound from the shrubbery on his left and he froze.

A large, familiar shape lumbered into view—Ee-chiya, snuffling in the early morning air like an old man with a sinus condition. The boy shook his head, then held out a hand, palm up. The sehlat halted at the hand signal, but continued to puff and grunt. He certainly showed no sign of returning to sleep.

"No, Ee-chiya," he whispered. "This is my own test. I have to do it alone. Stay!" He moved away from the sehlat, heading for the garden gate.

Ee-chiya looked after him, considered this in his slow, patient mind, then turned and loped off after his young master.

Meanwhile, Spock had clicked off the compact tricorder and had carefully repacked it with other items deep in his carry-bag. His head dropped halfway to the headrest on the bed before he seemed to convulse. His head and upper torso came instantly erect. Realization hit him subtly—like a small nova.

Of course, he yelled to himself, I should have remembered! It wasn't the actual Kahs-wan ordeal his "cousin" had intervened in to save him!

Reaching for the carry-bag he made haste to unpack his clothes. It took only minutes to lay out the desert suit and boots, moving with as much speed as quiet would permit.

When the sun rose over the black mountains, it turned the hard-baked desert floor the color of molten lead. Ee-chiya still trailed close on young Spock's heels. They were headed for those same forbidding dark peaks. Under the circumstances

and given the task he'd set himself, the peaks seemed as logical a place to prove himself as any other.

Quick physical collapse was an early threat of the real Kahs-wan. That was one test Spock no longer worried about. He strode along easily at an even pace, seemingly untired. Of course, all of his walking so far had been in the pleasant chill of night and the cool of early morning. Soon it would grow hot and the sun would pull moisture from him. That is, unless he elected to stop and find shelter for the day. He hadn't decided yet.

He refused to let such dismal possibilities intrude. Were it not for his anguished state of mind he could have enjoyed the hike. As for any unpleasantness that might lie ahead, he was determined not to let his spirits drop. The most important element in the Kahs-wan was mental.

Ee-chiya continued to mope along slightly behind. In his case it was not the *mental* aspect that was most important. The big animal was unused to such extended hiking. Eventually young Spock had to pause and wait for the sehlat to catch up.

Several long strides and his huge pet had done so. It promptly lay down on its belly, panting from the unaccustomed exertion and trying to catch its breath. Ee-chiya's spirit was willing, but the flesh was too old.

Besides, a sehlat's normal environment was the cool, high forests of the south. He managed well enough in his cool stall and in the thick shade of the garden at the house. But here, in open hot country his thick fur was a heavy burden. The rapidly rising heat would put a tremendous strain on the body of even a young, vigorous animal.

Young Spock stopped again and turned to face his pet squarely, hands on hips. His tone was gentle, but frustrated.

"Ee-chiya, go *home!* You are too old and too fat for this."

Ee-chiya leisurely examined this statement from his position on the warming sands. Then he put his great head down on his forepaws and assumed an air of patient dignity. Young Spock shook his head determinedly.

"Huh-uh, that's how you always get your way with father. It won't work with me. Go home, Ee-chiya."

The sehlat took no notice. He seemed quite prepared to spend the rest of his existence on this spot. It was clear to young Spock that the only way the beast would return home would be while trailing its master.

And he had a great deal to accomplish before that return journey could take place. He sighed, shrugged, and lifted his shoulders in a very human gesture that said, "I've done what I can." Then he turned and started off towards the high range at the same steady pace he'd maintained since leaving home.

Ee-chiya waited only a few seconds. Then he lurched to his feet and shuffled off to join his master.

After a while, another, taller figure reached the same spot. It paused to examine the depression left in the sand and soft gravel by Ee-chiya's relaxing bulk. A light breeze off distant desert plains swept sand and twigs into miniature dust demons, threatening manifestations of Vulcan's turbulent atmosphere.

He pulled out the tricorder as he resumed his walk. The trail of young Spock was clear enough, that of the sehlat was unmistakable.

"Personal log—the boy Spock should be moving toward the Arlanga mountains. He . . ." Spock hesitated, "I . . . had much to prove to myself. The personal ordeal, I now remember, on which I embarked was meant to determine the course my life would take. Many things are coming back to me now, as I retrace my steps of thirty years past and as I become more familiar with this time of my youth."

Sarek was just entering the garden. Amanda spotted him and left the shady seat to rush into his arms. She was calmer, more controlled than most terran women would have been in a similar situation. But to one of her Vulcan neighbors, she would have appeared almost hysterical.

"Sarek, I've looked everywhere. Our son and the guest are gone."

"And Ee-chiya?" asked Sarek calmly. Amanda frowned. She didn't know what she'd expected him to say, but that was not it.

"Ee-chiya?"

"He would go with our son," Sarek noted, "as he always does."

"I haven't seen him, now that you mention it, Sarek."

Sarek nodded. "I feel more secure knowing that. Ee-chiya's getting old, but it will be difficult for the boy to get into any serious trouble with the sehlat around. You're certain he's with the stranger?" Amanda looked uncertain.

"I don't know, really. Spock's not anywhere in the neighborhood—I've checked—and it's not like him to go off any distance without telling me. I don't know what else to think."

"This cousin," mused Sarek, "he puzzles me. Something very odd about him. I sometimes think I can see it, and then it suddenly eludes me again." Amanda gave an anxious start.

"You don't think he'd harm Spock?"

"I don't know what to think, Amanda. The man claims to be a relative and is friendly enough, yet there is this lingering strangeness about him that all his good-naturedness cannot conceal. However, I will take no chances. I shall notify the proper authorities immediately to watch out for either of them."

Amanda bit her lip. That was the only logical thing to do.

The desert ended abruptly in the first rugged ramparts of the mountains. Spock knelt to study the fresh trail of boy and sehlat, then rose and began his first real climb. The morning sun exceeded his rate of ascent.

The various formations he passed as he moved higher into the foothills were of igneous rock, stark and weirdly shaped. Not from wind erosion, but by the primeval forces of Vulcan itself. This was an area of geologically recent plutonic activity.

Once the ground turned upward his path became more difficult. Spock climbed slowly and carefully.

Something sounded in the air, distant. He stopped climbing and turned his head to listen. Nothing.

Several steps later he heard it again and this time it was unmistakable and much louder. A sound . . . no, there were two sounds, separate and distinct. One was a deep, grinding

snarl, the other the scream of an animal with a much higher-pitched voicebox.

The sounds conveyed anger and fury rather than fear. He began climbing faster. Each boulder seemed intent only on slowing his progress, every small fissure designed to catch and trip him.

Then he was running along a channel out through naked rock. The old watercourse twisted and turned before finally opening into a broad natural amphitheater.

On the far side young Spock was scrambling for safety, trying to stay behind protective rocks and at the same time gain height. The le-matya swung at him with venomous claws. They barely missed a trailing leg, digging shallow gouges in the soft stone. As young Spock dodged behind another boulder the le-matya screamed in frustration.

It was built like a terran mountain lion, but huge. The nearly impenetrable leathery-grey hide was more reptilian than mammalian, as was the poison in its claws. Again the high-pitched scream sounded, like the sound of metal rubbing on metal at high speed, grating from the depths of that awful gullet.

The youngster moved higher and reached for a handhold. Instead of a handhold he found himself confronted by a sheer wall of shining black obsidian. It was no more than three meters high—not much of a barrier. But there was no way up it and no way around. It might as well have been three thousand.

He turned his back to the volcanic glass and awaited the le-matya's charge. If he could dodge the first swipe of the monster's claws, he might be able to slip past on that side before it could swing again. The le-matya snarled and drew back a paw for a last, final blow.

It was never delivered.

An aging Ee-chiya struck the le-matya like a runaway warp-drive, rolling it over completely on the high ledge. The heavy, square head, neither cuddly nor benign now, bit quickly and with surprising speed. Yellowing old teeth made a deep double slash in the le-matya's flank.

Spitting and squalling, the carnivore twisted free, clawing at the sehlat. Ee-chiya darted out of the way and threw a blow with one massive paw that barely missed crushing the le-matya's skull. The half-reptile glared and leaped at the sehlat with both sets of claws extended. Ee-chiya dodged that multiple death and in doing so lost his balance.

Both animals clashed together, off stride and on crumbling, uncertain footing. There was a moment's pause while they overbalanced. Then, locked in each other's grips, they tumbled over and over, clawing and biting, down the short slope. Ee-chiya's low, rhythmic snarls boomed in counterpoint to the le-matya's high-pitched, hysterical screams.

Spock hesitated only a moment. To challenge a le-matya unarmed was certain death. But for a while, the sehlat had it fully occupied. Maybe, just maybe . . .

He ran straight for the massive collage of fighting flesh. Young Spock saw him coming. But the sudden unexpected appearance of his cousin generated only mild concern. He was too worried about Ee-chiya.

The sehlat had managed to bury his fangs in the le-matya's thick hide. Powerful teeth failed to do much damage. His jaw muscles were too old and weak. There wasn't even much blood oozing from that armored skin. But the considerable bulk of the sehlat kept the writhing, spinning le-matya continuously off-balance.

It never saw Spock moving close by, eyeing it, waiting for a chance. The le-matya dug in and started to roll Ee-chiya over on his back preparatory to a killing strike. As the armored spine came up Spock saw his opening, ran, made the short leap. He landed firmly on the carnivore's back.

Incensed at the sudden new weight on its shoulders the le-matya exploded in frenzied anger. It jerked and twisted, trying to buck Spock off. Ee-chiya skidded back out of the way as the le-matya frantically tried to deal with this tiny but unrelenting tormentor. It screamed again and again.

By simply lying still and rolling over it could easily have dislodged Spock. But a le-matya, while long on ferocity and strength, was notably deficient in matters mental. So it did not roll over. Instead it kept spinning in circles and leaping

high in the air, trying to bite at the thing on its back. It had no luck.

Making a vise of his thighs and digging one hand into loose, flying hair, Spock leaned forward along the smooth neck and felt for the certain special joining on the animal's neck. If it suddenly decided to roll over, or jump back first against a boulder . . . He couldn't hold on indefinitely, and to let go now was an easy way of committing suicide.

There! That should be the place. Small but powerful fingers touched, moved.

The le-matya gave a long, drawn-out shudder. As the wild eyes closed it sank unconscious to the earth. Now the muscular form started to roll over on its side, but Spock was not worried as he jumped clear.

Turning, he glanced up the slope, but the boy was already down off the dark rocks and running towards the sehlat.

Ee-chiya was getting slowly to his feet when young Spock reached him. He threw his arms around the big animal's neck. The slight boyish shape had no effect on the huge furry mass. It shook itself, a long rolling oscillation that commenced at the nose and fluttered back to the short tail.

It seemed that his pet was unharmed, merely out of breath.

"Ee-chiya," muttered the youth, unable to enjoy the emotional release of crying. "Good boy, good old boy!"

Forgotten, but not upset by the neglect, Spock dusted himself off and walked over to the two companions. He'd bruised his thighs with the shifting, frictioning grip he'd held on the le-matya's back, and there was a possibility of a broken toe, but otherwise he was intact. He cleared his throat.

"I suggest we move away from this area before the le-matya regains consciousness. I do not think it will follow us, now, but it would be better not to tempt it."

"True," replied the boy, then, "thank you for helping me and Ee-chiya."

"It was only my duty, Spock," the elder version of himself told the younger. The reply held a slight hint of reproof.

"Mother says you should always say 'you're welcome.' " That caught Spock a little off guard. There was an awkward silence. Some sort of reply seemed called for.

"The lady Amanda is noted for her graciousness."

The youngster looked over at the motionless le-matya, a threatening shape even while unconscious, then back up at his cousin. He continued to stroke Ee-chiya's fur.

"Do you think I'll ever be able to do that neck pinch as well as you, cousin Selek?"

"I dare say you will," admitted Spock drily. "Come now. Let us leave this place."

They moved off, heading up the slope. A little while later they had circled the far curve of the amphitheater and were heading deeper into the mountains.

Neither of them noticed the occasional shiver that passed through the sehlat's body. Nor could they see inside to learn that the big animal was moving with increasing difficulty.

They'd entered an area where huge boulders and unworn volcanic rock had begun to mix with soil. The first deciduous trees grew here, marching down in friendly ranks from the wetter high plateau. Young Spock spoke again, his voice full of open childish curiosity.

"You followed me—why?"

For a quick moment Spock felt that he didn't have to be as careful as he'd had to be with his mother and father. But he paused before replying. Overconfidence might be his biggest danger. After all, his verbal inquisitor, though young, had an undeniably brilliant mind.

"I suspected you might attempt something of this sort. I sensed your worry about the Kahs-wan. Such an expedition seemed a very natural gesture." Young Spock looked up at him.

"I had to see if I could do it. A personal test first, a test for me and no one else. I *cannot* fail!"

"That is your father's desire?"

The boy spoke slowly, choosing his words with care.

"Yes, and my mother's. They . . . they confuse me, sometimes. Father wants me to do things his way, and when I ask her, Mother says that I should. But then she goes and—" He stopped and looked away from Spock, suddenly embarrassed over what he was about to confess.

Remembering, Spock continued the thought himself. "She's a human woman with strong emotions and sensitivities." He kicked at a loose pebble, unaware that he was repeating a gesture performed several times by his younger self the previous day.

"She embarrasses you when she displays those traits. And you are afraid when you see them in yourself, because of what your father wishes."

"How . . . how did you know?" young Spock murmured, quietly amazed. Uh-oh—it took Spock some fast thinking to find a way around that one.

"There is also some human blood in my family line, Spock." Then he added, taking some of the solemnity off the conversation, "It is not fatal."

"What you do not yet understand, Spock," the first officer of the *Enterprise* continued, "is that Vulcans do not *lack* emotion. This is an all too common misconception—among many Vulcans as well as among other races. It is merely that ours are controlled, kept in check. This adherence to principles of logic offers a serenity that others—excepting certain theological and philosophical orders—rarely experience in full.

"We have emotions, you see, so that is nothing to be ashamed of. It is as natural as having a sense of sight, or touch. But we deal firmly with them and do not let them control us. Nor are humans, like your mother, wholly ruled by their emotions. Instead, they must walk an uneasy, nerve-wracking tight-rope between the Vulcan principles of logic and reason and the—"

He would have said more—suddenly there were so many things he wanted to say to this boy—but they were interrupted by a low moan. It came from behind them.

Startled, they both turned. Ee-chiya was no longer right behind them. Instead he stood far back, half-leaning against a broken cliff-face. He showed no sign of moving toward them. They ran to the sehlat's side.

Up close, they could now see that the huge animal was swaying unsteadily on his feet. By the time they reached him he'd sunk slowly to the ground, his eyes glazed and dim.

"Ee-chiya!" young Spock shouted, completely forgetting Spock's recent lecture on logic and emotion. The science officer made an efficient, rapid examination of the distressed animal. If he could only remember the details of his own childhood, he'd know exactly what was the matter! He'd been through this experience once before—or had he? Everything was so vague.

The time was so distant, so insubstantial, so . . .

Nonsense, he told himself. The past was now—and it was very real.

Then he found what he was looking for—but didn't expect to find. Puzzled, he stared at it until he grew aware of young Spock's anxious gaze.

"It appears that the le-matya grazed him with a claw, here. A slight wound, not too deep. But that does not matter much, not with a le-matya. It should not have happened. I don't seem to recall—"

The boy interrupted. "Is he dying?"

Spock considered. When he finally replied it was with a double pain. Pain for himself, pain for what he must say.

"Yes."

The youngster looked stricken. He stared down at the rapidly weakening, moaning sehlat.

Spock walked away a few steps, his thoughts spinning. For the second time something completely unexpected had happened. Try as he might, he couldn't remember anything like this taking place before.

But musing on the perversity of the time vortex would do no good at all. The animal was dying. He would be dead already, only the strike had been a shallow one. So Ee-chiya had not received a normal dose of venom. There might be a chance.

But the boy's pet—his pet—would die for certain unless they could bring a healer here, and soon. He told young Spock as much, making no effort to sugarcoat the news.

"We cannot get him back to the city to a healer. He is too large to move without special equipment."

"Then what," and young Spock's tone was agonized, "can we *do?* There must be something."

"You are a Vulcan. What would be the logical thing to do?" The boy thought, looked up brightly.

"I have medicines in my desert kit. Can . . .?" Spock shook his head slowly.

"Even if by some chance you have a proper medication, there could not possibly be a large enough dose for an animal the size of Ee-chiya. Try again."

The youthful brow twisted with concentration, the mouth grimaced with the strain of furious thought. He looked up again.

"I can bring a *healer* here."

"It is a long journey back across the desert," Spock warned. "There are many dangers. And it will be night again soon. I will go." But his youthful self stood up, his voice defiant, determined.

"No. He is my pet. It is my duty. No one else can do this for me. But, will you stay with him?"

Spock considered, trying to keep events sorted out. If this had actually happened before, then his younger self should succeed in the journey. If it hadn't already occurred, and this was yet another variant in the time line, he might be risking his own life in all time lines by letting the boy go. Then he remembered the uncertainties of his early adolescence, the constant burning desire to prove himself again and again. He nodded his acquiescence, but reluctantly.

Young Spock took off immediately, disappearing over the rolling, heat-warped horizon in the direction of ShiKahr. Once the boy was out of sight, Spock relaxed and regarded the dying sun. It turned the desert floor to deep purples and threw maroon shadows in the lee of small dunes.

He reached out and idly stroked the massive head of the sehlat. The big fellow looked up at him trustingly. But it was also confused. That was no surprise. This was the first time it had gotten a close whiff of Spock. Obviously this tall stranger was not his young master.

And yet—smell and to a small extent sight, said otherwise. It was very puzzling.

"This did not happen before, I am sure of it," Spock said to him, ruffling the warm fur behind an ear. "My life's decision

was made without the sacrifice of yours, old friend."

Ee-chiya moaned softly and stayed calm under Spock's ministering hands.

"I know there is pain. I can help a little. Sleep now."

He reached over and moved both hands on the sehlat's neck, probing. Then he made a motion similar to, and yet unlike, the thing he had done to the le-matya. The great eyes closed all the way and the entire massive body seemed to slump.

Spock sat back and watched the desert. Absently, gently, he continued to stroke the now supine head. Kirk would have found the present tableau incongruous. Doubtless Dr. McCoy would have seen in it opportunities to apply his own particular brand of humor.

But to Amanda or Sarek, the pose would have looked entirely natural and very very much in character.

It grew dark rapidly and soon young Spock had to depend on his natural, well-developed night vision. Vulcan had no moon.

He moved at a fast jog across the black, shadowed landscape. His eyes rarely took note of dim shapes and distant moving objects. They stayed fixed on the ground in front of him. A few small nocturnal animals observed the passage of the slim, ghostly shape. They scurried instinctively for the safety of their burrows.

Once, the predatory shriek of a night-hunting le-matya cut the air. It was distant, and young Spock didn't break his stride. But he did look back over his shoulder. And in not looking ahead, he failed to see the coil of dark vines half-buried in the sand.

Another step—the vines suddenly uncoiled, snapping out like a dozen whips and grabbing at his legs. He made a half-running, half-standing leap that would have done credit to any athlete in his age class and fairly flew over the powerful thin tentacles.

There was a sharp, popping sound. One convulsing, clutching coil had just missed his ankle and snapped instead against the heel of his left boot. He continued on, resolving to

keep his eyes on the rough gravel and sand immediately in front of him even if a le-matya screamed right in his ear.

The writhing unthinking vines of the carnivorous *d'mallu* did not ponder on the near miss. They merely recoiled and reset as the plant—with the inherent patience of all growing things—arranged itself once more to wait for less elusive prey.

There was a peculiar emblem on the door, cut into the highly varnished yellow wood and inlaid with shiny metal. Below this an odd-shaped plaque, functional as well as decorative, was also recessed in the wood.

A soft, tinkling clash—wind playing with distant temple bells. It stopped, started again as young Spock shoved insistently against the plaque.

It seemed ages passed before the door finally opened. A tall, middle-aged Vulcan appeared, dressed in a togalike night garment. This toga was red with garish blue stripes. A private expression of a publicly prosaic physician.

The elder eyed Spock with evident displeasure. He was not in the mood for idle chitchat.

"The hour is late. I trust your errand is urgent?"

"Yes—," young Spock panted, trying to catch his breath and speak at the same time. "Most urgent, Healer. My sehlat fought a le-matya in the foothills. He suffered a small wound. The poison of the le-matya's claws is working in him now. Please—" The carefully maintained, even tone began to crack. "You must come with me. He needs your knowledge!"

The healer considered, studying his late-night caller. The dim light at the door made recognition difficult, but not impossible.

"You are Spock, son of Sarek, are you not?"

"Yes, Healer." The physician nodded in satisfaction.

"I have heard of you. You have a tendency toward what humans call 'practical jokes.' "

The youth nodded knowingly. He'd expected something like this. Vulcan gossip reached far and lasted long.

"It's true, I did that two years ago, and did not repeat it. Healer, I would not call you out at such an hour if it were not

deathly serious. You have heard several things about me, it seems. Have you ever heard the son of Sarek called a liar?"

The healer's tone softened. Such direct challenge from one so young could only be admired.

"No. That has never been said." A quick glance at the boy's disheveled clothes and flushed face brought him to a decision.

"Very well. Wait here and I will gather my things."

Young Spock called after him as he disappeared into the house.

"Healer, please hurry!" Inwardly, he was relieved. He'd delivered himself and his message so quickly, so urgently, that the healer had not thought to ask a most obvious question.

What was a young lad of seven doing in the black mountains with his sehlat in the middle of the night, and why had he come alone to get help?

Spock was not ready to waste time on embarrassing explanations.

It was wondrous strange to be sitting alone at night with a dying figure out of one's old childhood, instead of in the commander's cabin on the *Enterprise*.

The sehlat moaned softly, conscious once again. A quiver of pain ran down its flanks. Inside Spock's belly something tightened. There was nothing more he could do for the suffering animal. To put it under again might prove fatal in itself, given the advanced state of weakness of the creature's systems.

There was another soft moan. At first he ignored it. Then he rose and stared into the night. The moan was still distant, but growing rapidly louder. It had not come from the sehlat.

It was a thick purr now, rough and mechanical. He scanned the dark horizon wishing, wishing for a battery of portable lights from the starship. But the *Enterprise* had not even been built yet. He didn't have so much as a flare.

It was needed. Silhouetted against the night sky, he saw the source of the sound. A desert flier, a streamlined version of the standard city skimmer. Low and rakish, but practical; built for emergency bursts of speed.

An ordinary citizen would not rate such an expensive, compact craft. Logically, he had no need of it. It was also bigger than the average skimmer, big enough to carry several passengers. There were only two figures in it.

As the craft drifted closer he recognized his younger self and another, older man. That could only be the healer young Spock had gone to find.

The skimmer came close. It whined to a halt and hovered a meter or so off the ground. The rocks where he waited with Ee-chiya were jagged and close together, so the skimmer pilot had settled down in the nearest flat space. It raised a cloud of sand and dust before the older Vulcan cut its power.

He climbed out, and young Spock began to lead him up into the rocks. Spock turned and walked back to stand next to the heaving bulk of the sehlat. He stroked the head, scratched it behind weakly fluttering ears.

"It will not be long now, old friend."

A moment later young Spock and the healer appeared, scrambling over the last rise. They moved to join him.

The healer took only the briefest of looks at the long scratch where the le-matya's claws had struck. Then he removed several compact medical sensors from his carry-case and began a thorough examination of the stricken animal.

Spock stood and placed a hand on the youngster's shoulder. From the first there had been no shock at the sight of his younger self. He'd been well prepared for that. But this first actual physical contact brought home the alienness of the situation in a way that mere sight never could.

The full, true incredibility of it slammed home for the first time. Under his hand the boyish shoulder stirred. Spock felt a need to mumble something, anything.

"You made the desert crossing most efficiently, Spock. And at night too. I have a hunch—call it a preliminary evaluation based on sound initial observations—that you will not fail your father in the Kahs-wan." Young Spock didn't look up at him, instead kept his gaze focused on the sehlat and the healer.

"I wanted only to help Ee-chiya. He was my father's before he was mine. I didn't want him to come with me, but he

wouldn't stay behind. To lose him—" Spock interrupted as gently as possible.

"A Vulcan would face such a loss without tears."

"How?" Controlled or not, there was a universe of emotion packed into that one word, that single desperate exclamation.

"By understanding that every life comes to an end when—when time demands it. Believe me, Spock, when I say that the demands of time are not to be argued with. Loss of life is to be mourned, true, but only if that life was wasted.

"Such was not the case with Ee-chiya."

The healer looked up from the sehlat. He had to hunt a moment before locating them in the dark.

"Spock?" The youngster turned. So, automatically, did the older Spock. The boy glanced up at him curiously, but there were other things on his mind. He dismissed the incident as he moved closer to the healer. Spock followed, thankful that the healer had not witnessed the lapse in his meticulous masquerade.

"Yes, sir?" The sehlat was moaning louder and continuously now. The healer glanced down at the animal and shook his head slowly.

"It has been too long, I fear, and the scratch was deep enough. No known antidote can save his life." The boy stood silently in the dark, contemplative.

"Is there nothing you can do?"

"To save him, nothing. But I can prolong his life—though he will always be in pain. Or . . . I can release him from life. In this I will need your decision. He is your pet." The healer did not look up at him.

Alien, unchildish thoughts vied for attention within young Spock's mind. He turned away from the two adults so they could not see the effort he was putting into his answer—or the anguish that might be visible.

Spock waited several minutes, then moved up quietly to stand behind the boy. He put his hand on the small shoulder once more. This time there was no shock, no sense of unnaturalness. For the first time, he truly was Selek, the wise cousin. Young Spock glanced up at him, then back down at

Ee-chiya. When he spoke it was in a flat, mechanical voice, to the healer.

"Release him. It is fitting he dies as he lived—with peace and dignity."

The healer nodded expressionlessly and reached into his case. He withdrew a small tube whose size and looks belied its effectiveness. There were only three controls on it—two tiny dials and a button at one end.

He adjusted the settings. Young Spock watched for another moment, then walked over and knelt beside the sehlat. He sat down on the hard ground and took the massive head in his lap.

Ee-chiya stared up at him and burrowed himself deeper, closer to the boy. There was an ethereal, minute hiss as though from a tiny spray. Young Spock's face remained unchanged, emotionless—Vulcan!

"I regret that my actions troubled you in any way, Father," young Spock said, "but I am convinced my actions were necessary." Sarek blinked in the strong light pouring in through the garden window as he studied his son.

There was something in the youth's attitude and speech pattern that the elder Vulcan had not detected before. In fact, both seemed somehow rather like . . . he chanced a quick and hopefully unnoticed glance towards his odd cousin, standing impassively by a far bookcase.

Spock was studiously examining an ancient terran book. It happened to be a fantasy, a childhood favorite of his by a terran with an odd name. Sarek could not see the title and it probably wouldn't have set any thoughts going in his head anyway. The paper books were Amanda's province. His mother, however, might have made something of the coincidence, but she was too relieved to notice much of anything but her son just now.

Sarek turned back to the boy.

"I hope you can explain *why* it was necessary. Your mother and I were . . . worried."

"There was a decision to be made," said young Spock firmly. "A direction for my life had to be chosen—and before

the artificiality of the Kahs-wan. I chose—Vulcan."

On the other side of the room, Amanda turned away briefly in her chair, fighting off tears. She felt a slight sense of loss, common to all mothers at those strange, off-center times when they realize their child is growing up. Her son had elected to follow the more difficult path.

Sarek exhibited no outward reaction to this announcement—but he was naturally pleased. Of course, it would be unthinkable to show it, or to smile. He nodded solemnly.

"It is well. You have comported yourself with honor." He paused. "We will see to it that Ee-chiya is brought home from the mountains."

"Thank you, Father." Young Spock shuffled his feet impatiently. "If you will excuse me now, I have some business to attend to."

"Business?" queried Sarek suspiciously.

"With some schoolmates. A demonstration of the Vulcan neck pinch. Our cousin taught me." He nodded by way of excusing himself and left the room.

When he'd departed, Spock replaced the friendly old tome in its slot on the shelf and moved towards Sarek and Amanda.

"I, too, must beg to be excused. I must make my farewells now. Your hospitality has been most kind, more than you can know. But I must journey on. Already I have spent too much . . ." he paused and almost, *almost* grinned, "too much time here."

"Just enough time," said Sarek gratefully. "You saved my son's life. There is no way I can ever repay you for that." Spock interrupted him smoothly, his voice turning serious.

"Try to understand your son, Sarek of Vulcan. His troubles, his confusion, his battles with his emotions. That will be repayment enough."

"An odd and intimate request from a stranger, but I will honor it. I am bound to honor it. If you ever pass this way again, or if there is anything I can ever do for you—all that I have is yours."

"I should like to, but I fear that circumstance will dictate that I not retrace this path again." This was becoming too

painful. It was time to leave. He raised his hand in salute. "Peace and long life, cousin."

"Peace and long life," saluted his mother and father in return. "Long life and prosper, cousin."

He didn't look back as he left the garden gate and started down the path leading back toward the desert. But he could feel their curious eyes on his back, watching, watching . . .

He remembered now that his parents had never mentioned a cousin Selek. He smiled inwardly. Even so, he understood now why he had never forgotten that remarkable individual . . .

James T. Kirk paced nervously back and forth in front of the Time Gate. He was alone on the rocky platform in front of the Guardian of Forever.

Unresolvable shapes drifted across the center of the time portal, cloaking unknown mysteries, enigmatic pasts. Suddenly he stopped pacing and stared at the rippling mists. They began to slow, to organize and coalesce into a definite pattern. The Gate was activating.

It was confirmed a second later as a deep, now familiar rumble issued from some still indeterminate locale.

"THE TRAVELER IS RETURNING."

Kirk studied the Gate with painful expectation. At first there was nothing. He began to worry. Then, in the distance, a transparent flowing form seemed to jump towards him. It was solidifying as it came through the Gate.

A familiar lanky frame, clad in the attire of another world's bygone days, stepped out and shook hands with him. Spock didn't say anything—but Kirk had had enough experience reading barely noticeable Vulcan expressions to tell that the trip hadn't been a total disaster.

Spock went immediately to his waiting pile of normal clothing. Off came the worn soft-suit and tight boots, swapped for the daytime uniform of a Starfleet commander.

"I sent the others up to the ship," Kirk volunteered in response to the unasked question. He nodded in the direction of the again blurred time portal. "What happened in there? You were only gone twenty-four minutes . . . subjective time."

"Nothing different happened, nothing unexpected, Captain." He paused. "Oh, one small thing was changed, nothing vital. A pet died."

Kirk looked relieved. "A pet? Well, that wouldn't mean much in the course of time."

"It might," Spock replied, "to some—"

Kirk eyed his first officer more closely as he swapped Vulcan carry-bag for utility belt, communicator, and other modern necessities. Kirk hesitated, decided to ask no further questions —for now. There were more important ones to be answered. He flipped open his communicator.

"*Enterprise* . . . this is the captain. We're moving away from the Guardian. There'll be two to beam up."

"Aye, sir," came Engineer Scott's reply.

A moment later both men stood still as a luminescent glow enveloped them and turned them into pieces of sun.

This state was quickly reversed in the main transporter room of the starship. Both Kirk and Spock held their positions, however, after rematerializing—Kirk uncertain, Spock apprehensive.

"Well, well, well!" Dr. McCoy stepped into view from behind the transporter console as Scott concluded final shutdown. The doctor looked at them and nodded knowingly, his tone as irascible as ever.

"So you two finally decided to end your vacation. While you've been running all over creation, I've been stuck performing semiannual crew physicals. You two are the last ones." Captain and commander exchanged glances, each certain he was more relieved than the other.

"Welcome aboard, Mr. Spock," said Kirk. McCoy moved closer, shepherding them out of the alcove and toward the elevator.

"Never mind the chitchat. I've got the mediscanners all set up for a Vulcan. I have to recalibrate every time I run a check on you, Spock." He made it sound like the biggest job since the hammering out of the Federation-Klingon peace treaty.

"Dr. McCoy," said Spock, moving towards the closed doors, "you do not know the half of your good fortune. If things

were only slightly different you might have to recalibrate for, say, an Andorian."

He and Kirk activated the call switch simultaneously.

"What's that supposed to mean?" McCoy inquired. When neither man replied. "If that's supposed to be a joke, I have to remind you that Vulcans don't tell jokes." He followed them into the waiting elevator.

"Times change, Doctor," suggested Spock meaningfully, "times change."

McCoy grunted, sensing something more than mere argument in the first officer's voice.

"Just give me time enough for a physical, that's all."

"All the time in the world, Doctor." Kirk grinned as McCoy hit the necessary button and they began to descend to lower levels.

It wasn't often he enjoyed something as much as that simple elevator ride.

ONE OF OUR PLANETS IS MISSING

(Adapted from a script by Marc Daniels)

I

Precisely two and a quarter ship-days after leaving the Time Planet the crew of the *Enterprise* received a general emergency call. There were undoubtedly rarer things in the universe than general emergency calls—but not many.

"What I'd like to know," Kirk inquired of no one in particular, from his seat in the bridge command chair, "was why someone didn't notice and chart this thing before it slipped into inhabited Federation space?"

Lt. Arex was seated next to Sulu at the helm-computer. Now he lifted all three arms in a popular human gesture and swiveled his thin neck so that he was facing the captain. Bright, intelligent eyes stared out from under projecting ridges of bone.

"*Quien sabe?* Who knows, Captain?"

Uhura's reaction was more reasoned. "Maybe no one thought it worth an emergency alert, Captain, until it did move so deep into Federation territory. It hasn't made any aggressive moves. Why should it attract much attention while in free space?"

"Even given its benign nature, Lieutenant—something of which we have as yet no proof," countered Spock, "the fact that a cosmic cloud of this size and density—not to mention its other peculiar characteristics—has never been observed before should have been sufficient to pique the interest of at least a couple of astronomers. I cannot help but wonder if there are other reasons why it was not detected."

Kirk grunted. They'd been examining and reexamining these same arguments ever since the call had been received. He didn't make a point of it, but he was upset. They'd been returning to starbase from the planet of the time vortex when the call had diverted them. R&R for the crew, not to mention needed ship-servicing, had to be postponed yet again.

"Just our usual luck—the *Enterprise* being the only starship of any size in the phenomenon's vicinity. Sometimes I get the feeling Starfleet Command picks on us."

"I suspect, Captain," Spock suggested, "that if we were to perform below expectations a few times, Starfleet would be in less of a hurry to select us for such tasks."

"Don't tempt me, Mr. Spock."

"I was not tempting you, Captain. I was merely proposing an alternative mode of operation with an eye toward alleviating your apparent discomfort at being so often chosen by Starfleet Command for such—"

"Oh, never mind, Mr. Spock." If he thought Spock was capable of ironic humor, he'd have suspected that—no, ridiculous.

"Mr. Sulu, let's see the grid."

"Yes, sir." Sulu's hands moved over the complex navigation console. A brilliant star-chart appeared on the main viewscreen. The overlying grid network permitted fast, crude calculation of speed and distances. Kirk's interest was on the Pallas XIV system. The exaggerated diagram showed close to one side of the moving white dot that was the *Enterprise*.

Three planets—Bezaride, Mantilles, and Alondra, plus a fair-sized asteroid belt—extended outward from Pallas I and II. All were small, inner-system type worlds. There were no gas giants.

The system revolved around a double star. Double-star systems were far from unusual, but those with planets were. And those with inhabited worlds were very much so. The Pallas system was very carefully studied before settlement was recommended. Not that Pallas II—Mantilles—was not a hospitable world. Quite the contrary. But Federation authorities wanted to make, well, double certain that the twin-star system was stable enough to support Mantillian life for at least a minimal period of time. Say, four or five hundred million years.

In addition to being blessed with two shadows per person, Mantillians enjoyed the notoriety of being the most remote inhabited world of consequence in the entire Federation. And while the planet was now safely populated and well beyond the initial stages of colonization, the Mantillians still liked to think of themselves as pioneers—their backs to the populous Federation and galactic center, their faces turned to the beckoning gulfs of intergalactic space.

They were a proud, self-reliant people. But the sudden appearance of this strange cloud had made them nervous. So the Mantillian government had shouted loud enough for Starfleet Command to hear, and Starfleet Command had shouted for the *Enterprise*.

And Kirk—Kirk could only shout at the gods of coincidence and bad timing. At least they didn't shout back, they only snickered.

He sighed. They were here. Find out what the thing was, reassure the Mantillians, and head for starbase once again—with closed channels this time, maybe.

"Mr. Sulu, let's have some timings." The helmsman's reply was quick and crisp.

"We will intercept the cloud in the vicinity of Pallas III—Alondra. The outermost planet, sir. It is not inhabited. There are only a few automatic scientific stations." Spock looked up from his hooded viewer at the computer-library console.

"Also, Captain, I might add that we are now approaching sensor range of the cloud."

"Initial readings, Mr. Spock? Starfleet wasn't very specific. I kind of got the impression they expected us to dig out our own information." He tried to show some interest as Spock looked back into his viewer and adjusted controls. Probably the cloud was a loose piece of nebula, a relatively harmless collection of thin cosmic gases.

Spock's report changed all that. There was nothing ordinary about *this* cloud.

"It is an irregular shape with shifting, undefined boundaries, Captain. On the mean, I would estimate some eight hundred thousand kilometers across and perhaps half that in depth. And it is quite dense." The soft-spoken Arex looked up from his seat at the helm and whistled, impressed.

"Immense! Twice the diameters of Sol III's three biggest gas giants combined!"

"We're all well grounded in basic astronomy, Lt. Arex," said Kirk drily. "Put up our present position, please."

Arex, looking slightly downcast, went to work at the console. "Yes, Captain."

Inwardly, Kirk chastised himself. There was really no call for coming down on Arex like that. He was only expressing a sense of awe and wonder at the sight of the peculiar intruder, a feeling everyone else probably shared. It was a liberty Kirk couldn't permit himself. Captains weren't supposed to be awed.

Anyway, it wasn't the thing's size that had suddenly worried him. It was Spock's information that the cloud was "quite dense." Sizewise it was small stuff compared to even a little nebula. But if the gas was thick, and could actually have some effect on an atmosphere—

The scene on the screen shifted. The vast mass of the cloud now appeared on the screen. It bulked to the right, galactic inclination, of Alondra. Now it was very close to the uninhabited outermost planet.

Then further, more worrying sensor readings started coming in. According to the *Enterprise*'s detectors, the cloud was composed of gaseous matter so thick in some places that it bordered on the solid. It was too thick to be a nebula, too thin to be a world. It neither rotated nor tumbled, showing splendid disregard for all the usual effects of motion and solar gravitation. Pallas I and II should be having all kinds of effects on it now, yet sensors continued to claim the cloud ignored the twin suns completely.

And it moved rapidly. Much too rapidly.

There it was, then. The seemingly bottomless Pandora's box of the universe had confronted them with yet another surprise.

"Come, Mr. Spock. Keep at the computer. Let's have further information," and, he didn't add, information that made a little more sense. Spock paused, looked up from his viewer.

"I'm sorry, Captain. I find myself quite intrigued by the phenomenon. There is both matter and energy active in the cloud, it seems. But to say the least, the combination is highly unorthodox. For example, the quantities of each do not appear to remain constant, but rather exist in a continual state of flux.

"This would imply that matter within the cloud is being steadily converted to energy. Yet it does not radiate more than a trickle of this apparent production."

"You're right, Spock, that's very intriguing." Kirk pondered. The closer they got, the more information they obtained, the more impossible this thing became. "It's very odd. It almost suggests . . ."

"Look!" Everyone whirled to face the screen at Sulu's abrupt shout.

The cloud had reached Alondra. Sulu switched hurriedly to long-range visual pickup and before their horrified eyes, the cloud slowly crept amoebalike across the face of the planet. It traveled over the planetary surface patiently, inexorably, and—one couldn't help but feel—deliberately.

Only Arex, mindful perhaps of Kirk's earlier reproof, kept his eyes on his instruments.

"Captain," he announced finally, "Alondra has disappeared from navigation scan." That sent Spock's gaze back to his library viewer.

Uhura suggested, "The cloud has come between us and the planet. Somehow that's interrupting scan."

"No, Lieutenant," said Spock quietly. "The cloud has engulfed Alondra." A long pause followed. The bridge was silent except for the tiny, nonconversational ticks and hums of various instruments. The next time he spoke, the science officer's voice conveyed an unmistakable feeling of alarm.

"Captain! The planet seems to be breaking up. Sensors indicate a definite and rapid reduction of planetary mass."

A hurricane of thoughts had roared through Kirk's head in the past few minutes. Now he found himself voicing the least palatable of them.

"Spock," he asked quietly, "is it possible that this 'cloud' *consumes* planets?"

"Captain, I believe that your question is unnecessarily replete with emotional overtones."

"This whole situation is unnecessarily replete with emotional overtones, Mr. Spock. Please answer the question."

"Extrapolating from all available sensor information, sir," his first officer replied, argumenative to the last, "it would seem a reasonable assumption."

"Sir?" Kirk looked over at Sulu. "The cloud is changing course."

"Ridiculous, Mr. Sulu. It's not a powered vehicle. A natural object should not—"

"Course change verified, sir!" added Arex excitedly. "Initial course computation revision indicates—" he paused, triple-checking his figures, "indicates it is moving now in the direction of the second planet."

"But if it continues oh that course—" Uhura called.

Kirk's voice was grim. "—Eighty-two million people will die."

Very quiet it was on the bridge then. Only the computers continued to converse.

"Mr, Sulu, prepare to increase speed to warp-eight. Push it to the limit. Inform Engineer Scott of the reasons, if he so inquires."

"Yes, sir," Sulu nodded. Kirk continued.

"At warp-eight, Mr. Sulu, we will intercept the cloud." At that Sulu looked back hesitantly towards the command chair, his gaze full of questions.

"We . . . will . . . intercept . . . the . . . cloud," Kirk repeated distinctly. He was well aware everyone on the bridge was staring at him. Well, what the hell did they expect? "And before it reaches the inhabited planet, Mantilles. Despite the fact that we are still uncertain as to the cloud's true nature. Despite the fact that it masses many millions of *Enterprise*'s.

"Ready, Mr. Sulu!"

"Course plotted and set, Captain."

"Warp-eight, please, Lieutenant."

Sulu did a small thing. Only God and helmsmen could warp the very fabric of space—and at times like these, some helmsmen got the two confused.

That's why navigation officers and chief engineers had the highest rate of turnover and mental crackup in Star-fleet.

The *Enterprise* responded and leaped ahead.

"If we can't stop it, Jim, millions of people will die."

Kirk swiveled his chair. "Hello, Bones. I know. Perhaps more."

"True, Doctor," continued Spock. "If planetary annihilation is indeed a part of this thing's nature, it might seek out worlds as instinctively as any animal seeks out food. It may even

consume stars as well as planets—though it seems woefully small in comparison to even a small star."

"Almost as small as we are in comparison to it?" Kirk mused. Spock, naturally, did not smile.

"Almost, Captain. Yet we know nothing of the cloud's limitations. If it has such selective ability, it could prove a threat to every world in our galaxy."

"Bones?" McCoy moved to stand close to Kirk. Everyone on the bridge could imagine, or thought they could, what was going on in the captain's mind right now. So they resolutely ignored the resultant conversation.

"Bones, I need an expert medical opinion on mass psychology."

"Then you've come to the wrong place, Jim." The jest fell flat. "Seriously, I can venture opinions, but not expert ones."

"You're the best I've got, Bones. Tell me—do we dare tell the people on Mantilles what we know? So that they can attempt to save at least a portion of the population? They have instruments, they can guess—but they won't know until it's too late."

McCoy looked up at the screen at the moving cloud. The distant view showed no bulging eyes, no gaping jaws. In appearance it was no more threatening than a cloud of steam.

"How much time do they have?"

Arex supplied the answer, and Kirk didn't even think of reprimanding the lieutenant for eavesdropping. "Four hours, ten minutes, sir."

McCoy looked at Kirk. "I suspect the people on Mantilles are organized, well-educated, civilized, thinking human beings, Jim."

Kirk nodded in confirmation. "That's how I see it, too, Bones. They'll panic, all right." McCoy grinned tightly.

"On the other hand, Captain," reminded Spock, and it was natural that he should be the one to voice the thought, "they may still manage to save some small portion of the populace."

"A great deal could depend on the executive in charge, Jim," McCoy continued. "Who's the governor of Mantilles? Do you know anything about him?"

"Robert Wesley," Kirk murmured, thinking back in time to a long-past incident. "He was in Starfleet once. Left it to accept the governorship." He glanced meaningfully up at the doctor. "He's no hysteric."

McCoy didn't hesitate. "Then tell him."

"Coming up on the cloud," interrupted Sulu. "ETA five minutes ten seconds."

"Very well, Lieutenant." Kirk whispered back at McCoy, "Thanks, Bones." Then he raised his voice and gave orders to Uhura.

"Lieutenant, send a priority one call to Governor Wesley on Mantilles."

"Aye aye, sir."

As the *Enterprise* gained distance on the cloud, viewscreen perspective had to be forced down once, twice—yet a third time. Then it was impossible to widen the view or reduce it any further.

There was nothing in the screen now but the shifting, enigmatic, threatening cloud-shape. It blotted out the universe.

Bland as the actual picture was, it exerted a tremendous fascination. Everyone stared at the nearing, gaseous form. Everyone but Spock. He found more of interest in his computer readouts.

"Captain, I'm getting anticipated readings from the chemical analysis sensors."

"Anticipated, Mr. Spock? Oh, you mean . . ."

"Yes, Captain. They are most unusual, in keeping with the unique nature of the cloud."

"Well, don't keep us in suspense any longer, Spock. What kind of readings?"

"There are indications of elements present in the cloud that are utterly unknown in our periodic tables, sir—both natural and artificial. I am now ninety percent certain of what has heretofore been only theory."

"Which is?" Kirk prompted.

"That this object has originated outside our galaxy."

"Captain!" yelled Sulu abruptly. They all turned back to face the screen.

A segment of the massive shape was twisting, bulging with ponderous speed. From the bulge long tendril-like spiral streamers of thick cloud suddenly reached out, out, in the direction of the *Enterprise*. Once formed, the fluffy pseudopods moved with uncanny speed and flexibility.

"Evasive action!" Kirk shouted, hands reflexively trying to dig into the metal of the command seat.

"Aye, sir!" shouted Arex as he and Sulu worked frantically at the helm.

But this close to target, evasive action was nearly impossible to coordinate. The *Enterprise* was no hummingbird, to spin on its own axis or suddenly fly backwards. Even if the fabric of the ship could have survived such a maneuver, everyone and everything on board would have been thrown out through the forward superstructure by sheer inertia.

It was like being attacked by a ball of loose cotton. The long streamers entwined themselves gently about the *Enterprise*. Then, warp-eight or no warp-eight, space-twisting engines or no space-twisting engines, the ship began to retract steadily back into the cloud.

"Full reverse thrust," ordered Kirk, more hopeful than sanguine.

"Full back engines, sir," Sulu confirmed. The bridge shuddered under the strain.

Except for computer-field compensation, the *Enterprise* would have been torn apart by the titanic conflicting stresses suddenly imposed on it. But the immense power of her engines was insufficient to pull her free.

"Not enough—it's not enough," McCoy said tightly, verbalizing the obvious.

"Some sort of antiplasma," Spock informed them, as if he were analyzing the composition of a candy bar. He looked up from the viewer. "It generates an unusually powerful attractive force. Not gravity as we know it, but similar." Kirk hardly heard him.

"Prepare to fire all phasers into the cloud mass. If possible, aim at where these tendrils connect with the mass itself."

"Locked on," said Sulu mere seconds later.

"Phasers ready," added Arex.

"Fire!"

"Firing phasers."

Ravening, destroying beams of pure force lanced out from the *Enterprise*—only to vanish with no visible effect into the cloud mass. They might as well have been beaming at the sun.

"Nothing, Captain," reported Sulu. Spock supplied an answer for the incredible.

"The cloud appears to have the ability to absorb energy, Captain. This is not surprising in view of what we already know about it. The beams of our phasers were not reflected by any sort of shield. Of course, anything that can manage the breakdown of a planet's molten core—"

There was no need to finish the thought. Try to harpoon a whale with toothpicks!

The streamers continued to pull the *Enterprise* closer to the cloud. Sulu was the first to notice the rippling in the surface of the roiling mass. A small opening appeared, expanded.

Its warp-drive engines still fighting in reverse, the star-ship disappeared into the cloud.

Kirk's stomach, on the other hand, was moving upwards and any minute now he was sure it would pop right out his mouth. The lights on the bridge fluttered, dimmed, and fluctuated wildly. Uhura was thrown out of her chair by an especially violent concussion.

Sulu was tossed a meter into the air before being slammed down to the deck, while Kirk and Spock held onto their respective chairs for dear life.

Only Lt. Arex, with his three arms and legs, managed to retain anything like a stable position.

Fortunately, the severe shaking lasted only a few seconds. Buffeting became rapidly less and less violent. In a little while the ship had completely recovered its normal equilibrium.

"Uhura?"

She scrambled back into her seat, grimacing at the lingering pain, and started checking her console for breakage.

"Sore backside, Captain, that's all. Nothing vital damaged."

"That's a matter of opinion," McCoy disputed. Everyone was too tense for a really honest laugh, but the sortie took the edge off their initial shock. Kirk even managed to smile. As usual, Spock stared blankly at his chuckling comrades.

"Mr. Sulu?" Kirk called when the stifled laughter had stilled, "are you operational?" He tried to make a joke of it. The navigation officer was in obvious pain and just as obviously trying to hide it.

"I believe—there is a possibility my left leg is broken, Captain."

"Report to Sick Bay, Lieutenant." But Sulu showed no signs of leaving.

"If you don't mind, Captain," he replied, already checking his computer to establish their position, "I'd like to stay at the helm." Another flash of pain showed on his face, but he turned away from the others and Kirk had only a glimpse of it.

McCoy objected loudly, heading in Sulu's direction. "Lieutenant, I order you to—" Then he paused. Now more than ever Kirk was going to need the senior navigation officer's abilities. "All right, Mr. Sulu, you can remain at station as long as I can put that leg in a temporary splint."

McCoy set about his task.

Sulu Watched his viewscreen, wincing only now and then.

"All right, Mr. Sulu," Kirk called. The viewscreen had gone blank. "See what you can get on the scanners." Sulu worked several controls.

Nothing happened.

"Emergency backup, Mr. Sulu." Immediately Sulu was manipulating an alternate set of switches. The screen started to clear, a picture to form—and there was a concerted gasp from the bridge.

The scene in the main screen was weird and beautiful. They appeared to be floating in a misty fog over a wavering, fantastic landscape of muted grey and brown. Huge, monolithic icebergs—shards of the planet Alondra—drifted with them in the mist. Many of the fragments were the size of

large asteroids. They dwarfed the *Enterprise* whenever they moved close.

McCoy found further reason for amazement.

"We're still intact," he mused wonderingly, "but we must be inside the cloud!"

Uhura checked in. "All decks report considerable shaking up, Captain, but only slight damage." Sulu looked up from his station.

"Captain, objects approaching off the bow. Coordinates, well," he gestured at the viewscreen, "there they are."

A moment later a pair of huge, irregularly shaped blobs hove into view. Kirk didn't need sensor readings to tell him that they were heading towards the *Enterprise*. They were moving with impressive speed. Their size increased to threatening proportions as the distance between them and the trapped starship decreased.

"Deflector shields up and operating," informed Arex. He'd initiated deflector operation without Kirk's command—in this case, the sign of a good officer. There was a time and place for protocol—and a time and place to ignore it.

"More objects approaching aft!" added Sulu excitedly.

Kirk studied the clumsy, growing shapes intently. There was nothing to mark them as belligerent. They were utterly devoid of stinger, claw, fang, or for that matter, any other surface feature. It was the deliberateness of their approach, the indication of clear purpose in the way they moved towards the *Enterprise* that hinted at unfriendly intentions.

The cloud was also devoid of surface features.

"Analysis, Spock?"

"Nothing elusive or concealed about these, Captain," the science officer responded. "They are some organized form of highly charged antimatter."

At that point the highly charged voice of Chief Engineer Scott filtered over an intercom.

"Engineering to Captain Kirk." Kirk hit the broadcast switch on the arm of his chair.

"Kirk here. What's up, Scotty?"

"Captain," answered Scott ominously, "this drain on the deflector shields is too great for them to hold for any length of time."

"I know, Scotty." Kirk took another quick glance at the screen. Now the distinctive bright red of the blobs was pulsing visibly. As their color heightened in brilliance, one couldn't escape the impression that they were readying—something.

"Scotty, prepare the shields to deliver an antimatter charge. I can't tell you how strong it has to be, but you can be ready to give more than a tickle."

There was a brief pause, as though Scott was thinking about saying something. But only a firm, "Aye, Captain," came from the speaker.

Sulu shifted his eyes from the screen, kept them glued to the console until a rarely activated light winked on.

"Antimatter charge ready, sir." The gigantic blobs were almost on top of the ship.

"Discharge!" Sulu jammed in the switch.

Instantly, although there was no visible explosion, no blinding flare of light, the two amorphous masses fell back from the *Enterprise*. There was an isolated cheer from Uhura, but it died quickly. Their relief from the alien assault was only temporary.

A short distance away the blobs slowed, paused, and stopped. Everyone on the bridge waited breathlessly. Then they began to advance on the starship once again. But there were hopeful signs. The powerful antimatter charge the *Enterprise*'s engines had delivered had had some effect. The bright crimson color of the two aggressive forms had faded, the sharp pulsing seemed weaker. Now both were a light shade of pink.

"Double the charge, Mr. Sulu."

"Sir?" Sulu looked doubtful. Kirk's reply was not.

"I said double the charge."

Sulu did things with the console. "Ready, sir."

Kirk watched, waited until the two monstrous shapes seemed ready to envelop the ship, then, "Discharge!"

The blobs hesitated, shuddered—and began to fall away from the *Enterprise*. As they did so their color shifted from pink to light pink, to white. Then the massive shapes started to break up, to dissolve into smaller and smaller pieces which then vanished into nothingness.

Nervous conversation filled the bridge. Everyone seemed to have something to say, except Spock. His mind was obviously elsewhere.

"Well, Spock, any conclusions?"

"Only the beginning of a theory, Captain. A hint of a hypothesis." He dropped the bombshell with maddening calm. "It is possible that this cloud in which we are entrapped is a living thing. A conscious, animate entity. It is my considered opinion, barring future data to the contrary, that it is alive."

Arex whistled. There were similar exclamations of surprise and shock from the others.

"That's a sweet one, Spock." Kirk's initial impulse was to reject the incredible statement out of hand. A living being eight hundred thousand kilometers across! Insane!

Yet Spock, while unshockable himself, would be fully cognizant of the effect such a pronouncement would have on the rest of them. He might call it a theory, he might call it mere hypothesis, but he wouldn't mention it unless he felt pretty damn sure of his supportive evidence. So Kirk swallowed his natural reactions and instead turned calmly to Bones. Such caution had saved him embarrassment more than once.

"How about you, Bones? Any opinions?" McCoy, he noticed, had been using the library-computer annex to run some questions of his own.

"There's certainly some resemblance, Jim. I don't know how much we can depend on that. But I can tell you one thing. We have to get out of this area. Those mists out there," and he nodded in the direction of the screen, which showed only a thin grey fog, "have, according to the latest readouts from our chemical sensors, many of the characteristics of macromorphase enzymes.

"If the shields should fail—and they won't stay up forever, not under this pressure—the hull will be rapidly corroded

through and we'll all be broken down into nice, bite-sized, digestible particles."

"I am inclined to agree with the doctor, Captain," said Spock, staring into the computer viewer. "I have been running continual checks on the planet Alondra. Its ruptured mass has been steadily growing smaller ever since we entered the cloud. Energy levels, concurrently, are up. The obvious analogy is inescapable."

"It's converting mass into energy, of course," Kirk agreed, startled at how easily the stunning words came. "Even so, we —"

Everyone glanced up in alarm at a loud, raucous blast of sound. It came from Uhura's station. She recovered from her initial surprise, checked her station, and hastily lowered the volume.

"Captain, I have a subspace message from Governor Wesley on Mantilles." She paused, looked away in mild embarrassment. "I forgot. I was able to initiate the requested call to him before we were—pulled in."

Kirk considered. He could take the call right here, of course. But the fewer people who knew of the ultimate decisions taken with regard to the doomed world, the better. Word could always slip out somehow, and there might be personnel on board the *Enterprise* with relatives or close friends on the outpost planet. He had enough crises to handle.

He rose. "I'll take the call in my quarters, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Sulu, Mr. Spock—utilize our scanners to assemble a chart of the cloud's composition and interior structure. Then give it to the library for analysis and preparation of initial diagrams. It's time we knew where we were." He turned and was on his way to his cabin before the two "yes, sirs" reached him.

II

The short walk from the elevator to his quarters gave him a few precious seconds to think. The number of options open to him now was severely limited, and growing smaller by the minute. It didn't take much time to examine them all.

Eighty-two million souls.

Poof.

He shook his head and cursed the vilest curses he could think of. There were times when he wanted to take the old, antique projectile weapon out of its protective case in the officer's lounge and blast away at everything fragile and delicate in sight. That was the trouble with modern weapons. Phasers had no recoil, made no more noise than a door buzzer. Their destructive capabilities were considerable; their psychological value to the wielder, nil.

Eighty-two million. The death of ten or twenty intelligent beings at one time he could grasp, could comprehend. But this—it was too overwhelming, too enormous a figure to terrify. An entire world reduced to a loose mathematical abstraction.

Only the people who lived on it were real.

Bob Wesley was only slightly older than Kirk. His manner as he stared out from Kirk's private screen was calm, steady, competent. His face held a few more lines and his hair was greyer. The subtle assassins of politics could be harder on a man than all the terrors of space.

Now he looked even older than his years. He made no attempt to conceal the burden he was feeling, to hide the agony he felt. When the image first materialized on the tiny screen, Kirk was shocked. Kirk tersely gave Wesley the facts.

"Three and a half hours, Jim," said Wesley slowly, each word rolling and booming like the clang of a great bell. "It's not enough. Not nearly enough. Even if I had the ships available to really evacuate." Kirk tried to think of something encouraging to say, could only come up with honesty.

"You have time to save some *people*, Bob."

Wesley mumbled a reply. "If the word gets out—and it will, no matter how hard we try to keep it secret—it will only start the panic sooner." He coughed softly. "But you're right, of course. We must do what little we can."

Kirk had never seen a man look so helpless. He wondered how he'd be standing up to the pressure if their positions were reversed. Strong men had committed suicide out of inability to cope with far less crushing situations.

Self-destruction, at least, was not Bob Wesley's way.

"How—," Kirk found himself choking on the words, "how are you going to choose?" Wesley's answer was expected.

"There is no choice, Jim. We'll save some of the children." He made a tired gesture of dismissal.

"And now if you'll excuse me, Jim. I'd like to talk—it's been a long time—but I've many things to do. There's not much time left."

"Sure, Bob." Kirk strove to sound cheerful. It came out false. "I'll talk to you later, if there's anything new." Wesley shrugged slightly.

"If you want." He sounded like a dead man already. Composed and resigned to an inevitable fate. The screen abruptly went dark. Kirk stared at it for long minutes, thinking. Gradually his brows drew together, and his teeth ground against one another in silent anger.

By the time he'd reached the bridge again the cloud of depression that had begun to overtake him, too, had been thrown aside by an invincible determination, a resolve to do *something*.

But *how?*

In three hours and twenty minutes the cloud would reach Mantilles. If that were permitted to happen millions of people would die. The elevator reached the bridge, and he stepped through the doors.

Very well—it must *not* be permitted to happen.

It was as simple as that.

He stopped, returned the stares of each and every one of the officers present. When he finally resumed his seat again

and spoke, the words were directed at Spock and McCoy.

"Come on, gentlemen. I need your help. Your analyses, evaluations, opinions—no matter how wild, how outrageous. Exercise your minds, dammit! We're going to find a solution—and *no* one on Mantilles is going to die."

To an outsider familiar with the situation, it would have sounded futile. But somehow, at that point in time on the bridge, it didn't. In fact, it seemed almost reasonable.

"Start with basics," he finished. There was silence on the bridge.

"If we assume the cloud is a living being," said Spock slowly, "then it must follow that it requires some form of continual nourishment to sustain itself."

Kirk nodded. "And we have postulated that the cloud lives on the energy it converts from the mass of the planets it consumes—in this case, the planet Alondra. Though as yet we have no firm proof of this."

"Quite so," Spock added. "But it is apparently like some huge animal grazing here and there in the pasture of the universe."

That poetic phraseology caused Doctor McCoy to miss twelve full lines of computer biological analysis. He had to back up the tape and rerun the information.

"All right," agreed Kirk, hand caressing chin. "Let's follow that line of thought through. Bones, what about those antagonistic blobs?"

"Offhand, judging from the way they reacted to our presence, I'd say they perform essentially the same function as teeth, Jim. They break up the largest chunks of matter for easier digestion. Maybe they sensed us as being larger than we were, because compared to those chunks of planet floating around in here, we're digestible-size already. Possibly our engines give off enough energy to fool them into thinking we're more nutritious than we really are."

Kirk nodded, turned to face Sulu.

"Lieutenant, the computer scanners should have come up with something on the cloud's internal composition and makeup by now. Let's see it."

"Yes, sir." Sulu turned to his console. "Computer schematic readied. Coming on."

He hit a switch. On the screen, for the first time, they had an overall view of the interior of their massive host.

In shape it was rather like a fat pair of disembodied human lungs, joined directly together. Instead of a trachea or esophagus there was a bottle-shaped bulge in its middle. Rising from the top of this pear-shape was another long, narrower cavity.

From the top of this area a long cylindrical passage appeared to open into space at the top of the cloud.

Thus reduced to screen-size and roughly drawn, the diagram looked insignificant, almost comical, like a child's drawing. But after what had happened to Alondra, no one felt inclined to laugh.

The problem was that the chart put the alien into too-easy perspective. The tiny white dot representing the *Enterprise*, for example, could not be shown to scale. It was much too big. In reality the cloud was too big to comprehend. As a diagram, it was reduced wrongly to a harmless crude shape.

Still, there were things to be learned from it, and Kirk studied the drawing intently. For him, at least, the drawing induced no false sense of security.

The outlines of the cloud's interior were not fixed, but appeared to flow and change as befitted a mostly gaseous organism. Anyhow, it was still solid enough for him to comment, "It seems to have some kind of regularized anatomy. That opening where we were first pulled in doesn't show. It must have closed fast right behind us.

"But there looks to be some kind of permanent opening up near the top."

"I don't know, Jim," chipped in McCoy, immediately picking up the captain's line of thought. "If this thing also has some kind of colossal digestive system ahead of us, I don't see how we could make it that far."

"Three hours, five minutes, sir," announced Arex dispassionately, "till the cloud reaches Mantilles." Kirk nodded acknowledgment of this information. He'd already made his decision. If nothing else, time dictated a move at this stage.

"Since we appear to have only one way out, we must try it. Mr. Sulu, take us to that central core area."

"Aye, aye, sir." Kirk put his right elbow on the arm of the control chair and rested his chin in the waiting palm. A slight smile parted his lips.

"And if this thing *does* have a stomach, we just might be able to give it a bad enough case of indigestion to make it turn from Mantilles—"

It didn't take long for them to reach the edge of the area the computer had pinpointed as the cloud's central cavity. There was only one bar to further progress.

The entrance to that cavity was closed.

Closed by a pulsing, vaguely irislike valve.

"We've reached the entrance to the central core, Captain," confirmed Sulu. McCoy laughed nervously as he studied their intended path.

"What do we do now—knock?"

The ship gave a sudden lurch. But this one was bearable and no one was hurt. It was nowhere near as violent as the severe jolts that had pounded them when they were first drawn into the cloud mass.

"No need, Bones," murmured Kirk tightly. "Here we go . . ."

The iris was opening.

Swept like a leaf on a tidal bore, the *Enterprise* was tossed into the core area, along with floating mist and several still gigantic chunks of the planet Alondra. Then the iris closed ponderously behind them.

The scene in the central core was as radically different from the areas they'd already passed through as it was from the naked blackness of space itself. This core section was a kaleidoscope of colors, a flaring, scintillating, rain-bowed chamber spotted with constant awesome explosions.

Huge slender pyramid shapes protruded from the side of the core wall they were drifting near. As they stared at the screen, a large section of planet drifted close by one, seemed to hesitate in space, touched—

A detonation that would have shamed anything smaller than a sunspot filled the viewscreen with blinding, pure white light. The glare faded rapidly. If the scanners hadn't automatically darkened to compensate for the shocking flash their eyes could have been seriously damaged. As it was, they were only impressed.

When they could see clearly again the first thing everyone noted was that the section of Alondra had disappeared. But the slender pyramid it had impacted on was glowing incandescent with residual energy—energy produced by their meeting and the resultant explosion.

A shock wave struck the *Enterprise* soon after, but the first flash had given the ship's computers necessary seconds to brace for the powerful side effects. After all, they were still operating at planetary distances from the wall. The ship wasn't damaged.

Explosions continued to occur at regular intervals, some weaker, some more powerful than the first. While the *Enterprise* rode the resultant shock waves easily, the constant rocking and buffeting hampered observation and made accurate navigation increasingly difficult.

Still, the starship managed to pick a path through the central core. By keeping it in one piece and on course, a sweating Sulu and Arex were earning their rank.

Uhura watched the pyramid destruction/growth cycle wonderingly. "What *are* those things?"

McCoy had been making analogies as well as observations. "I'm going to make an educated guess." He took a deep breath, let it out slowly. "I think we're now moving in what corresponds in man to the small intestine. Those shapes growing out of the core wall seem to be somewhat similar in basic function to human villi."

"Villi?" Kirk looked back questioningly at the doctor. Physiology, human or otherwise, had never been one of his favorite subjects. It seemed he'd spent too much time on spatial physics, astrodynamics, and administrative operations. True, a starship captain is supposed to have at instant beck and call only slightly less information than a ship's computer banks, but even so . . .

McCoy nodded. "The human small intestine is lined with millions of them, although they are more or less permanent. They don't destroy themselves on contact with food, as these seem to. They absorb nutrients into the body by—"

As McCoy droned on with his biological comparisons, everyone on the bridge had plenty of time to study the actual process. Though it was hard to compare the titanic forces at work on the screen to what was taking place beneath one's own stomach.

A section of some great mountain was drawn to a villus and following the now familiar pattern, disintegrated brilliantly on contact. The villus grew alarmingly as it absorbed the energy generated by the explosion.

At the same time the long pyramid shape disappeared. Or more accurately, shrank back into the core wall. Immediately, a new pyramid began to form and stretch outward slightly to the left of where the first had vanished.

That's when Spock looked up excitedly from his position at the library.

"Captain, according to conclusive sensor readings, those villi-analoges are composed of solid antimatter! If the *Enterprise* should touch one . . ."

". . . we'll disappear faster than a piece of chocolate in a phaser beam," Kirk finished. "Mr. Sulu, keep those shields up at all costs!"

"I'll try, sir."

Kirk returned his attention to the screen. The *Enterprise* continued to drift through the chaotic core. In some ways, the continuous mass-energy conversion cycle reminded him of a thermonuclear reaction—slowed down many times.

"Incredible, simply incredible," he whispered. "So much power—" He watched another chunk of world vanish in a shattering display of energy. There was enough power being produced here to drive endless fleets of star-ships, to light entire inhabited worlds. All wasted.

However, he reminded himself, the creature would consider it otherwise. If it was capable of considering anything, which he sincerely doubted.

"The villi reabsorb with the energy they take in and immediately begin to regenerate preparatory to repeating the cycle." Spock agreed.

"It is clearly all part of the natural digestive process in operation here, Captain. Sensors indicated when we first entered that a natural force-field of vast dimensions was in operation in this core area. At first I was unsure as to its purpose. Now it is perfectly clear. The field serves to contain the matter-antimatter contact/dissolution sequence and keep it within manageable bounds.

"Otherwise the creature would quite literally eat itself to death."

A telltale on Uhura's main board winked for attention, was instantly shunted to the main speaker.

"Engineering to bridge." Kirk hit the reply switch.

"Yes, Scotty?"

"Keepin' the deflectors this high is putting an enormous strain on the engines, Captain. Especially on our antimatter power supply. What with the continual maximum power demands on the shields as well, our reserve energy supplies are fallin' fast. Too fast."

Too fast, too fast—! Everything was happening too fast. Damn a universe which had infinity at its command and yet no time to spare!

"How much time have we got left, Scotty?"

"Twenty-one minutes, Captain—and there's no safety margin figured into that. That's *everything*. But if the power indicator drops below two antikilos, we'll not have even that. The engines won't have enough antimass to sustain reaction. We'll lose motive power as well as shields and deflectors."

"Thank you, Mr. Scott. I'll keep that information in mind." He snapped off the intercom and looked to the helm. "Push our speed, Mr. Arex. I know it isn't easy to maneuver in here, but we must make our way through the opening at the other end of this core."

Arex's voice was tight in reply. "Yes, sir. We'll make it, sir."

Long minutes passed while the *Enterprise* picked its way at high speed through the weird jungle of gigantic villi, surrounded by unceasing detonations of unimaginable power.

For a while it seemed they'd make the core exit with no trouble. Then—perhaps Arex or Sulu miscalculated slightly, or maybe their speed was simply too great for a particularly tight passage.

Spatial gyros screamed in sudden protest as computer emergency overrides strove to correct position. They were drifting towards one of the waiting villi.

"I can't hold it on course, sir!" Sulu yelled desperately. "I'm using full power!"

"Increase deflector screens to maximum."

"Deflector screens to maximum," Arex acknowledged.

The starship shuddered, straining to pull away. One of the huge slender pyramids seemed to leap out at them, reaching hungrily and growing gigantic in the viewscreen. Enormous—

It stayed enormous, but abruptly was growing no larger. And then it began to move, to shift out of view as the *Enterprise* shuttled pass.

Kirk tried to relax a little and found he couldn't. His muscles were knotted tighter than a reaction coil. Another pass that close to one of the villi and the deflector shields would surely collapse under the immense load. Once that happened, so would every atom that comprised the *Enterprise* and her crew.

The speaker cleared again. Another call from Scott. Kirk was half expecting it. That last narrow escape had used up any safety margin they might have had.

The question now was, did they have any margin at all?

"Take over, Mr. Spock," he said when Scotty had finished detailing their present status. "I'm going down to Engineering."

"Very well, Captain."

Scott was waiting for him when the elevator opened onto the main engineering deck. The chief said nothing, but went instead to a nearby console and indicated an especially eloquent gauge. The instrument said everything for him. It showed the level of reserve power currently available in the central antimatter reaction chambers.

Showed it hovering uncertainly right around the two-kilo mark.

"There it is, Captain. All the wishin' in the world won't change that level. If we don't stop the excessive power drain right now, it'll be the end of us."

"It'll be the end of us if we do, Scotty. You're a master engineer—in many ways this is more your ship than it is mine. Think of something!"

"Well," Scott's expression showed that he'd been pondering an idea for some time but even now was reluctant to voice it.

"Come on, Scotty—if it's anything more concrete than prayer, I'm willing to listen to it." He'd already tried the former, to no avail.

"Captain, all our sensor reports indicate that those 'villi' pyramid converters are antimatter—antimatter of high energy potential, to say the least.

"If we could somehow obtain a bit of it—an infinitesimal amount to the creature—it might serve just as well as normal antimatter fuels. Put it in the engine, and unless it has utterly unique physical properties, it ought to regenerate reaction. We'd have enough power to drive the ship at maximum and hold both shields and deflectors at same."

Kirk looked thoughtful. "That would take care of our lack of antimatter, sure. But we also need matter engines regenerated."

Scott smiled. "Matter's no problem, sir. I've already had my people working on beaming aboard some of the loose planet floatin' free around us. There's enough matter here to power a million starships.

"As for the antimatter, we can't touch it—or let it touch anything solid, of course. I've considered the difficulties fully, Captain. It's not like cuttin' firewood. But I think there's a good chance we could cut it with a neutral tractor beam and then transport it aboard."

"Transport it aboard?" Kirk looked uncertain. "If it contacts the inside of the ship or any of us, for even a microsecond, it'll be the finish just as surely as if we'd rammed one of the villi."

"That won't happen, Captain," Scott objected eagerly. "I'm sure I can rig a force-field box that will hold the antimatter

suspended in its center. A smaller, cruder version of the machinery normal fueling stations use. Then I can shift the whole thing by portable tractor beam into the antimatter nacelle. The small generator and controls for the field itself can be disintegrated the second the engines start to regenerate.

"Once we manage the initial transportin', the rest should be a simple matter." He noticed the odd expression on Kirk's face. "Sorry, sir, no pun intended."

"Don't give it a thought, Scotty—it doesn't matter." They smiled together. Then Kirk gave the chief engineer's proposal some serious consideration.

"Mr. Scott, this idea qualifies you for incarceration as a mental case. You realize that, don't you?"

"Yes, sir!"

"You've been under tremendous pressure lately and it's affected your thinking. Obviously you've been operating with several circuits loose."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Let's try the goddamn thing—"

Seconds later Scott was at the main engineering console, communicating his needs forward to Sulu. Then the two men headed for the transporter room on the run.

The *Enterprise* began to leave its weaving, bobbing course. It shifted as near as it dared to one villi. This protrusion had been selected because it was a little more isolated from its neighbors than most.

As Arex positioned them carefully, a tractor beam—its normal radiance lost in the glare of nearby eruptions—darted out from the ship and neatly excised a two-meter square chunk of the villi.

If the cloud-being felt this minute biopsy, it gave no sign.

"Got it, sir," announced Scott. Kirk was standing next to him in the main transporter room. "Mr. Kyle," Scott said to the transporter chief, "bring 'er aboard."

Kyle nodded. A large, dull metal cube with handles set into two sides rested on one of the transporter disks. Another side of the cube was filled with dials, switches, naked components and generating equipment. These produced and regulated the

invisible force-field inside. The field-cube was not impressive, but it would hold with stability enough antimatter to destroy a fair-sized continent.

A familiar little multicolored glow appeared just above the upper rim of the box. Kyle made a hurried adjustment of the controls. The glow vanished.

Slowly, he brought down the single transporter lever in operation and let out a relieved sigh as it hit bottom.

"Sorry, sir," he said to Kirk. "Close. Almost materialized it outside the field."

"Good thing you didn't," Kirk agreed calmly. Meanwhile his insides were still jumping. All the antimatter had to do was contact the *air* in the room. That would have been enough to set it off.

"I presume it *is* inside now?" Kyle felt secure enough to nod even without checking his instrumentation.

Kirk, Scott, and a pair of technicians moved forward towards the placid yet threatening box. Scott held a small control device in one hand. They mounted the transporter platform and one by one, took a look into the open cube.

Inside, floating easily in vacuum, was the loose piece of villus.

"So that's what antimatter looks like," whispered Kyle uneasily. Like most of the *Enterprise*'s personnel, his job never brought him in contact with the incredibly dangerous stuff. He could have done without this novelty, too.

"Doesn't look real, does it?" murmured Kirk. "It belongs more properly to the imagination. This material used to be the unicorn of atomic physics." He glanced abruptly at his chief engineer and his tone turned urgent. "Scotty, we've got ten minutes left."

Scott was checking the small instrument he held.

"Just wanted to make sure there was no oscillation in field strength, Captain. It's holding fine. Let's go."

He clipped the tiny rectangle to his belt. Then he and Kirk moved to stand on opposite sides of the cube. They gripped the handles and lifted. A tractor beam would have been easier, but riskier, too. Scott didn't want to use one field to

move another. Funny things could happen sometimes when energy fields of different properties and function intersected.

Theoretically, the cube was full of nothing. There should be only the weight of the force-field box itself. But dammit, it *seemed* heavier!

Dropping it would have no effect on the field inside, of course. Nevertheless, they walked very, very carefully. Certain sections of the human mind were sometimes reluctant to believe what another part might tell it.

When the elevator doors dilated and they stepped into the main engineering room again, it seemed like the whole technical section was waiting for them. No one offered greeting. No one made idle conversation. They knew what was in the cube.

Still moving cautiously, Kirk and Scott angled towards the door marked:

ACCESS ROUTE-ANTIMATTER CONTROL

And underneath!

ABSOLUTELY AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY—*Starfleet Reg. E-11634*.

One of the engineers operated the automatic safety door, and they entered the small service lift thus revealed. Neither man said anything as the lift carried them down and forward. It was a short ride. The door slid back.

They were in the antimatter nacelle.

A narrow walkway led down the middle of the chamber. Like the lift exit it glowed faintly with its own unceasing, permanent force-field.

If everything else on the *Enterprise* was to shut down, all power including life-support systems to fade—phasers, lights, engines—the small prelocked power supply that maintained this most vital function of the starship would remain activated and functioning.

If the entire crew were killed and every instrument on board destroyed, the starship would still be salvageable.

The field was necessary because nearly everything in the huge, cavernlike chamber except the lift exit and walkway—and themselves, of course—was composed of antimatter. This was the greatest accomplishment of Federation technology—engineering in negativity. The maintenance walkway they

were on was suspended from walls, floor, and ceiling by force-field insulators.

Cell-like bins lined the walls like the inside of some enormous insectoid hive. Each had simple red, yellow, and green indicator lights on the outside. Everything in here was simple and functional. Antimatter was difficult to work with, and there was no room for extraneous detail. It would have been too dangerous.

Red lights gleamed on all of the bins—except for the one closest to the lift-exit door. As they passed it, this single remaining green light faded out. At the same time, the middle indicator began to glow a bright yellow.

Scott glanced quickly at it and then ahead down the walkway.

"Well, that gives us two minutes." They moved as fast as they could, almost running now. They had to be careful. Normally the force-fields surrounding the walkway formed impenetrable barriers even a ground-car couldn't break through.

But now, as the main engines of the *Enterprise* began to die, the separate power supply that maintained the protective fields started to shift over to salvage mode. That meant using only enough power to keep the matter of the walkway, say, from contacting the antimatter of the chamber.

If they slipped and fell, they'd never feel the final impact, never know the moment of death. Because touching the floor here would mean destroying the instrument of touch, the attached you, and the entire ship.

It was a place for people with the patience and manipulative skill of surgeons. That's why the personality profile requirements for antimatter engineers were among the highest in the Federation.

At the far end of the walkway, which had seemed kilometers away, was a huge, unspectacular-looking circular chamber. Tubes radiated from it in all directions. An insulated instrument panel was set into the walkway nearby. Scott used his free hand to trip the comm switch.

"All right, Davis, we're here. Open it."

The single door of the chamber slid back with agonizing slowness. They carefully put the box inside the inner antimatter acceptance alcove. The door slid back automatically. There was a pause while the field cube was transferred to the inside of the main chamber.

Scott and Kirk hadn't waited to check on the automatic process. They'd dashed back to the lift door. Once there, Scott took the small control device from his belt. There was no time for a precheck, no time to see if the automatic partitioning device would dissolve the matter of the field cube in time.

A thumb descended at the same time as the yellow light on the nearby bin faded out.

A loud crackling noise like a ton of tin foil being crushed came from the area of the main chamber. There was a breathless pause. Then, a gentle violet hue appeared around it, seeming to issue from the chamber wall. Another crackling, softer, and suddenly the myriad webbing of tubes, and lines extending from the central sphere also shone with violet radiance.

The luminescence reached to the bins. Rapidly, the indicator lights began to change—from red, to yellow, to bright emerald green, winking on in a reassuring fugue of color.

Even more reassuring was the steady hum of energy that had been nearly absent when they'd entered. Now it filled the antimatter nacelle.

"Scotty," breathed Kirk slowly, too exhausted to feel satisfied, "you've just given the *Enterprise* and Mantilles a chance to live."

Scott looked totally drained. "Thank you, sir. I don't think I want to go through this sort of thing very often. I'd much rather do it in theory."

III

Kirk was feeling rather optimistic—unreasonably so—when he resumed his position on the bridge. They had coped with a seemingly impossible power situation; they could cope with anything else. He spoke to his left.

"Situation update, Mr. Spock?" Spock looked up from the computer again. As usual, the recent emergency had had no visible effect on him. His expression was neither elated nor discouraging—only neutral.

"The cloud is now only forty-two minutes, fourteen seconds from Mantilles, Captain. And while you were with Mr. Scott in the antimatter nacelle, I was able to ascertain an important fact. I might venture to say, even, a vital fact." His eyebrows went up, and as usual Kirk's attention intensified at that inadvertent signal. Something significant was up.

"This creature does have a brain."

If the creature had a brain, that implied the chance that—no, no—it was too much to hope for. Mad, in fact.

But then, this whole situation was mad.

Why mightn't it be consistently mad?

"Could . . . it possibly be intelligent, Spock?"

"It is far too early to guess, Captain. We really have no basis for such a supposition. Our information thus far is of purely anatomical nature. It has made only one action which might conceivably be interpreted as intelligent. It changed course from Alondra to move towards Mantilles."

Kirk shook his head frustratedly. "Not enough. We can't go by that. It might just have been an involuntary response to a new source of food." What now?

"Let's see what the computer cartographic sensors have put together, Mr. Spock."

The first officer adjusted controls. A diagram of the cloud's interior appeared again on the screen. It was much enhanced since the last time he'd seen it. Considerable information had come in since then.

"A great deal of electrical activity emanates from that big, irregular-shaped object at the top of the core, Captain. Dr. McCoy has been studying that activity and I believe he has something to add."

"That's right, Jim. The impulses fall in regular patterns to an extent that would seem to preclude random generation. They might be normal for where this thing comes from, but . . . I'm inclined to regard those patterns as similar to those I've seen before."

"Before? Where, Bones?"

"Everywhere—whenever I take a cranial check on any crew member. They sure *look* like intelligent brain waves."

"It's so big." Kirk muttered. "Hellishly big." He paused thoughtfully. "But if we can reach it before the creature reaches Mantilles, we might be able to save the planet. Whether it's intelligent or not."

"Jim? I'm not sure I follow you."

"I'm not surprised, Bones. You're a physician. Your mind, your thoughts, your instincts are geared towards preserving life. You wouldn't think of using photon torpedoes to destroy a living mind."

"Captain," interrupted Spock, "this is as you say, a living creature. I am compelled to mention that Starfleet regulations —" But Kirk had no time to listen to a lecture on regulated morality.

"Sometimes, Mr. Spock, through no conscious fault of your own, your recourse to logic in every matter makes you sound something of an idiot. I am aware of the regulations regarding the killing of intelligent life-forms.

"But as you yourself admit, we don't know that this life-form is intelligent. When I have to balance that remote possibility against the lives of eighty-two million Mantillians—well, how long would you hesitate?"

"Of course, you are correct, Captain," replied Spock quickly. In moments like these he was reminded that he was a Vulcan speaking to humans. In such emotional moments it was often better to say nothing to them than to be logical. "I did not mean to imply that—"

"I know, I know, Spock," admitted Kirk tiredly. "You really had no control over what you said."

"Are you implying, Captain, that my reaction was emotional?" Even tempered or not, Spock managed to sound outraged. Tense moment or not, there were some things that couldn't be permitted to go unquestioned.

"No, no, no, Spock! You could only say the first logical thing that—this being being—oh hell, let's drop it."

"A most logical decision, Captain."

Kirk started to retort, then remembered that Spock had no emotional need to resort to sarcasm. Faced with disaster after disaster he was beginning to retreat into inanities. That was no way to inspire the confidence of his crew.

Kirk stared resolutely at the screen—and thought.

Eventually they reached the borders of the area the computer had labeled a brain. The new sector turned out to be made up of deep yellow cloud crisscrossed with pulsing white cables and lines that vanished in all directions. Spock and Uhura were using the sensors to prepare a detailed chart of the brain interior so that the *Enterprise*'s powerful torpedoes might be used to best advantage.

Scott was still keeping a close watch on his precious engines, so Uhura was handling the basic programming. McCoy remained on the bridge. He always felt—though Spock would have considered it absurd—completely useless in such moments.

At the same time McCoy hoped fervently his talents wouldn't be required. This constant paradox in tight situations was rough on even a well-balanced individual. That was one reason he made so many jokes. Laughter's therapeutic value was vastly underrated. But he wandered aimlessly about the bridge, trying to stay out of everyone's way and for the most part, succeeding.

In fact, this kept him free for one of his primary functions.

"Am I doing the right thing, Bones?" Kirk asked him quietly. "Starfleet prime directive number two prohibits the taking of intelligent life. I once said myself that man would not rise

above primitiveness until he stood up and vowed, 'I will not kill today.' "

"You also said you couldn't let this thing wipe out over eighty million lives," McCoy countered gently. "Certainly that takes precedence over the second directive."

"I know, I know! Viewed objectively, or logically, as Spock would prefer—there is no choice. But I'm the one who has to live with the decision to kill."

Spock spared him further introspection. "Captain, I've completed the analysis of the target area. I am afraid your initial estimation of the destructive capability of the ship's photon torpedoes was badly overrated. According to my calculations, our entire offensive armament is insufficient to insure the creature's destruction, let alone incapacitation." He paused.

"However, there *is* one other possibility. The brain could be completely destroyed if we aimed the *Enterprise* at its center and then converted the entire ship to energy. Such a single overwhelming strike should prove mortal. It would certainly cripple the creature and remove its ability to hunt out specific worlds."

"That sounds like you're telling us to blow up the ship." guessed McCoy incredulously.

"I believe that is what I just said, Doctor." McCoy had no argument to counter with. Like the rest of them he'd been caught completely unprepared for the science officer's words.

Only Kirk wasn't shocked.

"I expect those figures on the limits of our photon torpedoes are accurate, Mr. Spock?" he queried. "You've checked and rechecked them, no doubt."

"Naturally," Spock replied. "I do not profess to be enamored of the idea of destroying ourselves, Captain. I have no more wish for self-destruction than anyone else. I merely report the facts as they exist and suggest alternative lines of operation for your consideration."

"But that is your recommendation?"

Spock nodded. "We seem to be left with no other alternative."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock." Kirk drummed fingers on the arm of the command chair. Spock was right. They'd run out of options—and were rapidly running out of time.

Even so, he hedged.

"You're sure it would do the job?"

"Yes, Captain. Quite sure."

Kirk leaned over and spoke into the communicator grid. "Kirk to engineering."

"Engineering," came the distant voice. "Scott here."

Kirk composed himself and rehearsed the words in his mind. He wanted Scott to get it right the first time.

He remembered the last time he'd uttered the words, when they'd battled the strange energy-being in orbit around the bulk of a dead star. But in his mind he'd known that was a feint. A desperate one, but still a feint. A trick to frighten their unwanted passenger away. It had worked.

This time, however, it was different. He had no tricks in his mind, no hidden surprises to spring on this lumbering, alien entity. It was to be a kamikaze strike, plain and simple.

Idly, he wondered where that strange-sounding word had come from.

"Mr. Scott, prepare the self-destruct mechanism in the engines. Computer control for triggering the device will be here, on the bridge. Rig it with Lt. Uhura." There was a long pause at the other end. "Mr. Scott?"

"Aye, sir." Kirk clicked off and sat back. The following comment turned the atmosphere in the room topsy-turvy. It was typical of McCoy.

"Well, gentlemen, that's one decision you won't have to live with." Even Kirk smiled.

"Wait til you hear the next one, Bones. It'll kill you."

"What on Vulcan is the matter with you two?" queried Spock blankly.

"Nothing, Spock," McCoy was quick to counter. "You're right, as usual. As a comedy act, we're dying."

Kirk chuckled. "Stop it, Bones. That's an order." He paused, grinned even wider. "You're killing me."

Spock shook his head wonderingly. "Humans!" There was no contempt in the friendly exclamation. A little pity, perhaps.

Kirk's smile faded. They didn't need pity right now. They needed miracles.

Meanwhile, Uhura had nearly finished programming the cerebral diagram. A light flashed on her console as she was setting the schematic for display. She checked it, then swiveled around in her chair to look over at Kirk.

"Incoming communication, sir. It's Governor Wesley on Mantilles."

Kirk considered retreating to his cabin again to take the call, immediately squelched the idea. By the time the information reached the rest of the crew, the fate of the *Enterprise* and the eighty-two millions on Mantilles would already have been decided.

"Put it on the viewscreen here, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir." She made the necessary connections. "Go ahead, Governor." Wesley's image strengthened on the screen.

Very little time had passed since his last conversation with Kirk, but he seemed to have aged years, not hours.

"Hello, Jim."

"Bob, is the evacuation proceeding?" Wesley nodded wearily. His words were delivered in a flat, even tone, interspersed with long sighs. The fresh attitude of determination that had gripped the *Enterprise* had no such counterpart on Mantilles.

"Yes, its started. We're doing as well as we can. Oh, there was some hysteria at the beginning. But the government's been very candid with them and they appreciate that. They've taken it well, all things considered. Damn well. Much better than we had any right to expect.

"I think the announcement that we're going to take only children made the potentially dangerous ones sit down and do some serious thinking. The few real nuts we were ready for." His face was a study in frustration.

"But it's only five thousand, Jim. Five thousand, out of eighty-two million."

"I know," Kirk murmured compassionately. It sounded woefully inadequate, even presumptuous—but Christ, what

else could he say?

Wesley's frustration found release in a burst of anger. "The hell you do! You sit up there safe in your starship and—" He caught himself right away. The anger vanished as quickly as it had come and he slumped in his seat.

"I'm sorry, Jim. I'm . . . sorry." Kirk said nothing this time. It was amazing that Wesley had managed to hang onto his sanity.

"We can see the cloud approaching, Jim. We have no more ships left."

Sulu's voice intruded, charonlike. "Thirty-one minutes, four seconds to Mantilles, sir." Kirk nodded absently.

"Bob, where's Katie?"

"Here." Wesley smiled and looked off-screen to his right. "With me."

That, somehow, settled things. He'd been ninety percent sure. Now it was complete,

"Don't worry, Bob. She'll be all right. I promise you that." He paused, tried to think of something else to say. There were many things, going all the way back to their days at Starfleet together. And no time. No time for any of them No time for anything more than a—

"Goodbye, Bob."

"Goodbye, Jim." The image faded from the screen. After a pause, McCoy spoke up.

"Who's Katie?"

"Hmmm?" Kirk had been deep in thought. Should he have told Wesley what they were going to try? No . . . best not to raise false hopes. The Mantillians, it seemed, were resigned to their probable fate.

McCoy was waiting patiently. "Oh, sorry Bones. His daughter. She's eleven, I think. Spock, you commented on the vast area of this brain. Is there anyway at all we could contact a mind so huge, any way at all we could determine if it's intelligent? Perhaps a Vulcan mind touch—?"

"I had not considered it, Captain," replied the science officer, genuinely surprised. "I expect I was too close to the

idea. But it would require physical contact. That is quite impossible." He paused, thinking.

"However, I might be able to reach out with my mind. There is an enormous quantity of electrical energy playing about the ship—the creature's thoughts. If we focus our sensor pickups on them, the resultant information could be routed through the library's phonetics/languages section for breakdown into comprehensible abstract idea structures—words. There is the strong possibility that none of these impulses represent anything as developed as reasoning thought . . ."

"But it's damn well worth a try," agreed Kirk. "Question is, can we handle it?"

"I can link in the universal translator," added Uhura excitedly, "and route the results through the audio systems from here!"

"Too many complicated linkups," Kirk complained. "But that's all mechanical. What really worries me is . . . can you do it in time?"

Spock considered. "It is impossible to calculate all the variables, Captain. There are a great many unknown factors. I make no promises."

Kirk noticed that he didn't mention another possibility . . . that contact with such an enormous mind might fatally overload his own.

Sulu, "Twenty-six minutes exactly to Mantilles, sir." Now who was wasting time?

"All right, Spock. Get on it." Spock and Uhura's stations became a center of feverish activity as technicians poured onto the bridge to help modify existing circuits and systems for a task their designers never dreamed of.

Kirk took a moment to take care of one other detail.

"Captain's log, star date 5372.1. This may very well be the last entry in the log of the U.S.S. *Enterprise*.

"It is only a matter of minutes before the cosmic cloud referred to in previous entry reaches Mantilles." He glanced back at Uhura's communications alcove. As his or her respective task was completed, the technicians began to leave the bridge. There were quiet murmurs of encouragement for

Uhura and the rest of the regular bridge complement—especially for Spock.

"Science officer Spock has been working on the problems involved in reaching the cloud's thoughts—if it has any. But even should he succeed, I doubt there is enough time left for any meaningful exchange to take place. The possibility that we could persuade it to avoid Mantilles is . . ." He stopped.

If Uhura and Spock failed, no one would ever read this entry. It would vanish with the rest of the *Enterprise* and her crew in a matter-destroying holocaust of stellar magnitude.

If such a possibility appeared imminent while they were in free space, he could have shot the log clear. It was permanently mounted in a special, super-fast courier torpedo equipped with a powerful homing beacon. The entire setup was supposed to insure that even if a starship was visited with total destruction, it's log—and perhaps the reasons for its destruction—would survive.

Its builders had not envisioned this particular situation, however. Once free of the *Enterprise*'s sustained shields and deflectors, the torpedo would be barely a snack for the cloud's energy-converting villi and amorphous drifting "teeth."

No, he would finish *this* entry only if Spock and Uhura were successful. The entry would conclude on a positive note, or not at all.

Located on the helm-navigation console between Sulu and Arex was a large digital chronometer. Efficient and obedient, it shifted a seven out of sight and replaced it with a six. It took no notice of its impending annihilation.

Kirk spared only a brief glance at the elevator when the last of the technicians filed out and Engineer Scott arrived. He'd have to handle the engineering from on-bridge station now. Uhura would be completely occupied with monitoring the complicated communications linkup system.

"Engineering reports all tie-ins completed and operating, sir. The procedure is ready."

"Thank you, Scotty." He looked at Spock and waited.

Spock made two final connections, checked an audio lead, and then moved to the iibrary-computer station.

"Ready, Captain." Kirk and McCoy exchanged looks . . . perhaps their last, though neither man regarded it as such.

"You may proceed, Mr. Spock," Kirk whispered, not knowing why he did.

Spock turned in his chair and swiveled it towards the main viewscreen. He leaned back, closed his eyes, and extended both arms, hands and fingers together, straight out in front of his chest.

Several seconds passed. They seemed like days. Then his wrists began to turn slowly from side to side, rotating with near mechanical precision. Kirk had seen this before, but he watched with as much fascination as everyone else.

No one dared make a sound.

With a sudden move that startled everyone, Spock's hands jerked inwards and his fingers, still spread, started to shift backwards. They moved back, back, until the fingertips touched his head. The thumbs rested just under the earlobes and both little fingers met in a connecting line above the eyebrows.

The other fingers were fully extended and spread over his head, from forehead to just above the back hairline. He sat perfectly straight in the chair—rigid, motionless, even to the point of not appearing to breathe.

A voice spoke then . . . but it didn't come from Spock. It had an eerie, faraway quality and emanated from a speaker in Uhura's console. The phenomenon was startling to hear. It was even more startling to see.

It was Spock . . . and it wasn't.

"Listen To Me . . . Listen to Me. You Are Not Alone Here. There is Someone Else. Listen To Me . . . Listen To Me . . . Listen to Me."

Seconds. Gone. Now.

Silence. The chronometer changing. Five to Four.

An explosion . . . a tsunami of sound washed over them, swelling, to fill the bridge.

Uhura gave a little jump. Her free hand rushed reflexively to her earphone. She'd been prepared to detect, pick up the tiniest reply and had taken the full force of the aural jolt. It partially deafened her for a moment.

She adjusted a dial and brought the volume down. What came over the intricate farrago of circuitry and speakers was filtered via the slightly feminine alternate computer voice. It was hesitant . . . only one word, but clear and recognizable . . .

". . . WHAT . . .?"

"You Are Not Alone Here," Spock repeated. "There is Someone Else. Listen To Me . . . Listen To Me . . . Listen To Me . . ."

Silence again. Then the voice that could only come from one place . . . and every place. From all around them.

". . . WHAT . . . YOU . . .?"

"I Am Another Being," said Spockvoice from the console.

It was like watching a shadow play. There was the silent, motionless figure of Spock, his lips unmoving and his voice speaking from a grid halfway across the room.

And another voice replying from out of nowhere. Spock repeated the words, again.

"I Am Another Being."

Vast immense slow voice.

"BEING . . .? BEING . . . WHERE . . .?"

"I Am Inside You."

"INSIDE . . .? EXPLAIN. WITHIN ME . . .?"

"I Am Very Small, And There Are Many of Me. We Are Within a Starship Which Is Within You."

". . . EXPLAIN . . . ELUCIDATE . . . CLARIFY . . ."

"A Small Thing That Holds All We Smaller Things. We Beings."

Somehow the great voice managed to sound astonished.

". . . THIS . . . WITHIN ME . . .?"

"Within You."

And now, curious . . .

". . . EXPLAIN . . .?"

Kirk and McCoy exchanged desperate looks. At this rate it was going to be a long, complicated process . . . too long.

The digital chronometer read 04.

"We Came To Think To You," Spock continued. "You Consumed Us. You Thought We Were Food."

". . . WHY . . .? WHY YOU THINK TO . . . ME . . .?"

Spock explained. "It Was Needed Done. Many of Us Live on Things You Consume."

". . . YOU LIVE ON THE THINGS I CONSUME . . .?"

"Yes. Many of Us Live on One Such Thing Near You Now. Do Not Consume It."

". . . ELUCIDATE . . ."

"The Spherical Mass Ahead of You. The Matter You Intend to Ingest. Sense It Closely. Sense It . . . As You Sense Me. Do This Now . . ."

There was a pause . . . they couldn't afford.

"How near is Mantilles now, Mr. Arex?" Kirk whispered.

"The cloud will impinge on the Mantillian atmosphere in three minutes, twenty seconds, sir."

"YES," came the voice finally, "I PERCEIVE MANY SOMETHINGS. SO . . . SMALL . . .!"

"They Are Still Beings," pressed Spock. "Alive . . . Like You. If You Consume Their Sphere-Thing-Home They Will All Die."

Another pause. Navigational controls all but forgotten, both Sulu and Arex stared fascinated at the chronometer. Their unwavering gaze failed to halt 04 from shifting down to 03. Sweating cold sweat, they looked back at Spock.

". . . TOO SMALL . . ."

"Explain," said Spock.

"I AM SMALL . . . SOMETHINGS I PERCEIVE . . . TOO SMALL. NOT ALIVE BEINGS . . ."

Kirk hammered once, softly, on the arm of the command chair. There was no way, no way Spock could explain to it in time. How *could* he explain? How could a creature that dwarfed planets be convinced that there lived on those surfaces an intelligent mold called man?

"Listen To Me," Spockvoice murmured. "I Am Going To Come Into Your Mind. At The Same Time, You Must Come Into Mine. Do You Understand?"

". . . REASON(S) . . .?"

"Then You Will Be Able To Sense What Kind of Beings We Are. You Will Sense We Are Alive."

". . . NECESSARY . . .?"

Was there a hint of fear in that voice? Was the titanic, stellar-sized mass afraid?"

"Yes, Very," Spock insisted.

Yet another wait . . . longer, this time.

". . . PROCEED . . ."

The first officer's hands reached out from his head again. His arms remained outstretched in front of him, fingers spread, palms upturned. No one breathed. No one moved. Several prayed.

Uhura forced herself to glance at her own console chronometer. Saw the 03 become 02. She stared at it, frozen, like a bird surprised by a snake.

Spock suddenly relaxed. He opened his eyes and looked around curiously—blank. Rising slowly from his seat he started to walk around the bridge.

He stared at Kirk, Dr. McCoy. At Arex and Sulu and Uhura, at the instruments on the console, the floor, the viewscreen, and then at his own hands and feet.

"Bones," Kirk whispered, realizing once more that in the vastness of the universe it was often the unspectacular that was truly awesome, "*he's the cloud.* Its thoughts are here."

Attracted by the sound of his voice, the Spock/cloud turned and walked over to him, stared, examined. As though using a strange new tool for the first time it put out a hand and touched Kirk's face. The hand moved awkwardly, roughly, and sensed what it touched.

McCoy made a move as if to interpose himself between Kirk and the Spock/cloud. Kirk's order was sharp.

"Don't move!"

Spock/cloud concluded its examination of Kirk and walked around the command chair. It looked curiously at the viewscreen, which still showed the diagram of the cloud's brain. Kirk kept his voice low as he spoke to Uhura.

"Lieutenant, use the library computer. Put some views of the Earth up there."

"Yes, sir." She moved cautiously to Spock's station, but it wasn't necessary. The Spock/cloud was thoroughly engrossed in the screen. Buttons were depressed, switches struck. The screen changed to a view of Earth taken from space. Kirk rose and stood next to Spock/cloud, talked to it smoothly,

"This is the thing we come from." He backed up a few steps, turned and whispered to Uhura.

"Lieutenant, this is what I want . . ."

The image on the screen changed, closing in on Earth until the continents—so familiar to Uhura, Sulu, and Kirk—showed. The picture moved in tighter on the Western Hemisphere, then on North America.

Uncaring of the frantic controlled activity going on around it, the chronometer adjusted from 02 to 01.

Still deeper moved the scene, for aerial views of cities. Closer and closer, as the timer began ticking off seconds.

People began to fill the screen . . . lots of people. People working, people playing, people eating and producing and reproducing and caring for children. Children playing as the chronometer went to thirty seconds.

"Awaiting your orders," said First Engineer Scott calmly. He stood waiting at the engineering console, his thumb over the flip-up protecting the double combination self-destruct lever. Kirk held up a warning hand.

"A few seconds yet, Scotty. We have to give Spock that much."

The pictures flashing on the screen concluded, fittingly—as Mantilles might—with children.

The chronometer said twenty seconds. Uhura wanted to scream.

She backed away from the library as the Spock/cloud turned slowly and walked back to its chair. It sat down easily and leaned back a little, slumped. Kirk returned quickly to his command seat.

McCoy's voice was husky. "Jim, it's got to be now. If we don't self-destruct now, all those people will be killed."

At McCoy's words, something suddenly died inside the captain. He felt amazingly calm, unafraid. And tired, so tired.

Just give the command, James, and you can rest. It'll be over in an instant—

He turned to face Scott.

Like a man gasping his last breath while suddenly recalling his life, the chronometer went from 01 to 00 . . .

Sulu nearly leaped out of his seat.

"The cloud has stopped, Captain! The edge is just touching the outer atmosphere, but it has *stopped!*"

". . . COMPREHEND!" boomed the thunderous drone from Uhura's open speakers. ". . . NOT DESIRE TO CONSUME OTHER BEINGS . . ."

The cheering that erupted on the bridge was spontaneous and thoroughly undisciplined.

"Quiet!" Kirk shouted.

"There Are Many Things in Our Galaxy Like The One You Now Perceive," Spock continued, apparently unaffected by the outburst. He hadn't joined the cheering.

". . . TRUTH . . .?" rumbled the voice.

"Truth. You Do Not Desire To Consume Other Beings. It Would Be Best Therefore If You Returned To Your Place of Origin The Way You Came. Will You Do This?"

". . . A LONG JOURNEY . . ."

"Will You Return?" The console Spockvoice was persistent—insistent.

Eventually the voice replied. Its tone was almost indifferent, as though its decision were of no consequence.

". . . PERCEIVE. WILL RETURN TO ORIGIN PLACE . . ."

There was a long wait. Then Arex spoke excitedly without shifting from his place at the helm.

"Sir, sensors indicate the cloud is moving away from Mantilles. And picking up speed rapidly!"

Kirk left his chair and moved quickly to Spock.

"Lieutenant Uhura, contact Governor Wesley and tell him he can bring his ships back. If he asks how and why, tell him it seems that armaggedon has a conscience."

"Yes, Captain!" Uhura's voice was alive with relief.

Kirk studied his first officer. He started to put a hand on Spock's shoulder. Maybe the slight touch—but it wasn't needed.

An exhausted Spock blinked his eyes, held them open, and looked up at Kirk.

"Spock, you did it! The cloud is leaving."

"I believe so, Captain. There is no way out from this sector. But there is a weblike arrangement of cloud-substance at the top of the brain. The cloud uses this thick grid to 'sense'—it is not exactly like sight—other things with. A combination eye, ear, and many other senses too alien, too strange, to attempt description." He shook his head, blinked again.

"I have had but the slightest touch with it . . . fortunately. Its intellectual potential is astounding, but it has developed in ways utterly different from anything previously imagined.

"This web at the top is dense by its own standards, yet comparatively empty by ours. We can escape through it." No time for idle questions here.

"Mr. Sulu! Let's get out of here. That grid's on the schematic . . . take us through."

Sulu's response was . . . well, agreeable. His hands played the helm like an organ. Kirk started back to his chair, paused at a sudden thought.

"Spock, while the cloud was here, in you, perceiving us, where were—" His eyes widened slightly. "You must have been in the *cloud*. What did *you* perceive?"

Spock's mind had returned to his body, but his thoughts were still elsewhere. He murmured softly.

"The wonders of the universe, Captain," he shook his head at the incredible memories.

Moments later they were free of the cloud, having encountered no trouble in passing between the moon-sized gaps in the cloud's sensing grid. Once back in free space, Kirk ordered the *Enterprise* in a tight circle that would bring her rapidly back to Mantilles. The starship could help supervise the return of the overcrowded evacuation ships.

But for the moment, his attention was focused on the screen. It showed the vast cloud-shape, now shrinking rapidly as it picked up speed, heading towards the outer fringes of

the Milky Way. Spock was still staring after it, his mind filled with wonders he'd never be able to properly share with anyone else.

"Someday, Captain, when we are able to protect ourselves a little better, we may be fortunate enough to meet it again, or others like it."

"And when that day comes," Kirk agreed softly, caught up in Spock's own sense of wonder—and his own emotional release—"when that day comes, Mr. Spock, the ant will stand on its hind legs and converse with the man . . ."

Together they stayed watching the screen until the last faint hint of cloud was gone.

Only infinity and a few stars remained.

THE LORELEI SIGNAL

(Adapted from a script by Margaret Armen)

I

They eventually dropped Carter Winston off-ship in the system of Valeria. It was the nearest world to their exit from the neutral zone that was capable of dealing with the peculiar case of Carter Winston.

Not surprisingly, Anne Nored asked to be transferred to the security detail that would keep an eye—several eyes—on the prisoner both prior to and after the trial.

Not surprisingly, Kirk granted her request. He'd already come to the conclusion that if Carter Winston/Whatever was absolved of wrongdoing in diverting the *Enterprise* into the neutral zone—Kirk had told the Vendorian to plead compulsion—the presence of Anne Nored would be the best thing for him.

It would probably also be the best thing for Anne Nored.

He was mildly concerned that the Romulans might still try to make hay of the *Enterprise*'s incursion into the neutral zone, exhibiting their own damaged ship as evidence of the brutal Federation's unrelenting bellicosity.

As it developed, a number of things conspired to prevent this.

For one, there was the fact that the *Enterprise* had encountered not one but two battle-ready, fully prepared cruisers. They'd badly damaged one and put the other to flight, though the Romulans would doubtlessly insist that the second had broken off the engagement only to go to the assistance of its injured comrade.

Far more influential was Spock's official report, with corroboration by Winston, of continued Romulan visitation to the mutually quarantined world of Vendoria. Politicians handled this awkward situation in the usual way. A number of high-ranking officials quietly got together, shared a few drinks and dirty jokes, and decided to let the whole matter drop.

Meanwhile the *Enterprise* lay over in Valerian orbit to take on supplies for the first part of the new year and to make a

few much-needed repairs. McCoy, for example, had a chance to go over his medical instrumentation with the testing facilities of a major ground-based hospital. And Scotty had help in repairing the deflector-shield links that Winston had thoroughly disrupted.

Despite her extensive facilities there were still a number of minor components the *Enterprise* required which the orbiting supply station couldn't provide. But nothing the ship couldn't do without.

To obtain them Kirk would have had to travel a fair number of parsecs to the major naval base at Darius IV. Instead, he chose to spend the rest of the holiday season orbiting somnolent, restful Valeria.

While Valeria was still something of an outpost world, its larger cities offered sufficiently sophisticated fleshpots to satisfy the more cosmopolitan tastes of certain of the *Enterprise*'s crew. And her rural attractions sufficed to assuage the nerves of the less adventurous.

In sum, it was an ideal stopover world.

Kirk spent a week fishing at a magnificently clear, unpolluted mountain lake—relaxing, hiking, and letting his beard grow. At the end of seven days he found the open spaces oddly confining, the theoretical vastness of the mountain valley closing in until the surrounding peaks induced a sensation bordering on the claustrophobic.

A sure sign vacation time was up.

He returned to the *Enterprise*. Two days later the last member of the crew had been rounded up, brought back on board, and either treated for accumulated cuts and bruises, formally bailed out, or sobered up.

While in space his crew formed a perfectly integrated, smoothly functioning machine. But they were a reservoir of human emotions and resentments. Every so often these needed to be drained to keep his personnel healthy. Depending on your point of view, Valeria was the lucky or unlucky world that served as the requisite sponge.

Once back in free space, Kirk set the *Enterprise* on a course that would bring it 'round in a wide swine to pass close by Rifton, one of the Federation's seven principle Starfleet bases.

Kirk blinked, rolled over, and looked at the clock over his bed: 1730 hours. As good a time as any to make the necessary log entry acknowledging the formal orders they'd picked up from Starfleet branch headquarters.

In a sense, the log entry would be only a duplicate of the same orders, but apparently some analyst somewhere decreed it necessary. He sighed. Formal procedure, red tape, bureaucracy—as Einstein had claimed, one could circle the universe and arrive back at the starting point, which always seemed to be a forty-page report in triplicate.

He thumbed the switch activating the pickup in his desk, set the dial for cross-room reception.

"Stardate 5483.7. The *Enterprise* has been ordered to provide standard escort for a small convoy of ore carriers heading toward Carson's World." He didn't add that he thought it an inexcusable waste of starship time, not to mention a colossal bore. The sentiment wouldn't be appreciated.

If he'd known the alternative future he might have thought it otherwise.

"Said ore carriers are to pick up and then transport to Bethulia III four million metric tons of heavy chromium and other duralloy ores." He paused thoughtfully to consider his next words, began again.

"This shipment of alloy ores is necessary to the development of the burgeoning metals industry on Bethulia III, and to the planned construction next fiscal Starfleet year of two and possibly three new deep-space starships. In view of the Federation-Klingon Treaty of 5260 limiting offensive weaponry in this quadrant of space, it appears—" He frowned before really noting the source of the annoyance.

The small viewscreen set on his desk was blinking steadily, a demanding yellow glow. Someone had a message for him that couldn't wait. Irritably he shut off the log and swung his legs out of bed. It had better be important!

The viewer beeped as he approached the desk, and a green light winked on on the lower left side of the screen. Lt. Uhura was warning him that ready or not, the call was on its way in.

He sat down in front of the screen and activated the knob that would tell Uhura he was indeed present, alive, and well.

"Kirk here. What is it, Lieutenant?"

"Deep-space call from Starfleet Science Center, sir," Uhura's voice explained.

"But we've already received our—" He stopped. Someone on Rifton badly wanted to get in touch with the *Enterprise*, badly enough to requisition power to boost a transmission signal across the rapidly widening distance between them. It occurred to him that anyone who had the authority to do so might be rather an important person—and in a hurry.

He blinked the sleep from his eyes. "Put it through, Lieutenant Uhura."

The blurred image that started to form was confused with the distance and the weakness of the signal, but under Uhura's skillful hands the outside static was rapidly cleared. The picture that finally formed on the screen was that of Vice Admiral for Science Julianna van Leeuwenhook. It was still spotty and streaked with interference, but Kirk knew Uhura was working miracles just to hold it in.

"Captain James Kirk here." The vice admiral smiled slowly, her long gray hair falling in waves to her shoulders. "How are things at Science Center, Admiral? Sorry I missed you."

She shrugged, a slight gesture that might have confessed boredom, might mean something else entirely.

"So am I, Captain. It would have saved me the trouble of this call. But I didn't know until after you'd left contact range that the *Enterprise* was in the area. No need to apologize for skipping a social call. Deep-space transmission is expensive, but . . .

"To answer your question, things are the same as usual. Instead of making our work easier, every problem we solve turns up a dozen new ones. Every discovery opens a hundred new avenues of inquiry. While my staff and budget increase arithmetically, the number of projects we are supposed to fulfill—all of them marked top priority, of course—grows geometrically.

"Why, if my people and resources were to quadruple tomorrow, James, in two weeks we'd be hopelessly behind."

She smiled.

"Meaning you're not now?" Kirk countered.

"Most certainly we are, Captain. The only difference is, while it's still a hopeless mess, it's an organized hopeless mess." The smile shrank, to be replaced with a no-nonsense frown. "That organization just turned up an interesting discovery. That's what I want to talk to you about. But first, what is your present position and distance from Rifton?"

"Just a second, Admiral." He thumbed the intership comm unit. "Mr. Spock, our present position please?" There was a short pause, then the information came back to him.

"Nine-six-five-five right declension to the galactic plane, a hundred fifty degrees north."

"Thank you, Spock." He repeated the figures for the vice admiral. She nodded and didn't bother to check it on any device. Julianna van Leeuwenhook could do astrogation in her head.

"You've made good time. The ore convoy you're escorting—that was your new assignment, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Admiral," he admitted, steeling himself. The change in tense hadn't gone unnoticed.

"Well, they seem fairly well along their way. You've had no trouble thus far, have you?"

"No, Admiral."

She seemed pleased. "Good. Then I would think they could make it the rest of the way on their own."

"Their captains won't think so."

"They'll have to think so. I'll get in touch with the commander of the Dervish outpost. He can spare a small ship for the final escort run. He'll have to. The captains of the ore carriers can travel on their own for a while.

"Oh, I know their cargo will be too valuable to consign to a small frigate or some such. But by the time they've finished on-loading at Carson's World I'll have another starship there to meet them." She shifted in her seat, and the incredible communications system instantly transmitted the squeak of chair on floor across the light-years.

"You might even be able to get back to meet them yourself, Captain."

"Get back from where, Admiral?" Obviously their soft, if dull assignment was making off at maximum warp-speed for unexplored regions.

"I'd like the *Enterprise* to make a little detour." She tried to make it sound unimportant, trivial. That really raised the hackles on Kirk's neck.

"It's nothing, really. Shouldn't take you more than a day or two to investigate. The *Enterprise* is the closest ship to the . . . um, affected area."

Kirk sighed. At least it didn't sound like another catastrophe. He still had vivid memories of the Mantilles Incident.

"Yes, Admiral." He hit another switch. "Recording new orders." She leaned forward in her chair.

"You are familiar with the section of peripheral space that is now on—let's see—your port plane? Sector 4423—also known as the Cicada Sector?"

"Cicada?" Kirk's brows drew together as he considered the strange word. Oh, yes, the cicada was a terran insect that spent many years underground to eventually emerge for but a few days of activity in the sunlight before returning to the soil to develop and change.

The name seemed frivolous, too. But was it? Seems he recalled something about a mysterious, little-visited section of Federation-bordered space where starships vanished without a trace, not even leaving behind their log-torpedoes. These unexplained disappearances were infrequent.

All of a sudden, escort duty was beginning to look downright attractive.

"Cicada, that's it, Captain. I'm sure your science officer can supply you with additional information and fill in any details you might require. But briefly, the situation in the so-called Cicada Sector is this: The sector was first reached—but never more than partially explored—over a hundred and fifty terran years ago. Claims to the territory have been in dispute for at least that long, but there appears to be little of value in the

sector—certainly nothing worth fighting over has been discovered yet.

"Recent joint discussions with representatives of the Romulan and Klingon Empires reveal that a starship of theirs or of the Federation has disappeared in that sector precisely every twenty-seven point three-four star-years since its initial mapping." She stared into the screen.

"Does that suggest anything interesting to you, Captain?"

Kirk was taken aback. The question was rhetorical. Losing a starship from the fleets of three principalities in a single spatial sector to a sum total of six in a hundred fifty years was unusual, but not startling.

But some eager beaver in Science Center had researched the disappearances and found an uncanny regularity to them. At the very least the inferences one could draw were ominous. Natural disasters rarely operated on so strict a timetable.

"You see what I'm driving at, Captain," the vice admiral continued. "It would be only a slight shift from your current course and you would be able to check out the affected area. Nothing elaborate. Make a casual sweep of a couple of days through the sector, with your sensors wide open.

"Record anything out of the stellar ordinary. You can be in the sector in twenty hours."

Not much use in hesitating. "We'll be happy to do so, Admiral." He paused to scratch a persistent itch behind one ear. All of a sudden, something didn't smell right—something that bothered him and he couldn't pin—ohhhh, yeahhhh!!!!

He stared into the screen. "Uh, Admiral, how long ago was the last disappearance of a ship in the sector in question?"

"Very perspicacious of you, James," she replied easily. She made motions of consulting an off-screen chart "Ummm, yes . . . it was, I believe, exactly 27.344 star-years ago." Kirk nodded.

"I guessed, Admiral. Your reputation doesn't include deep-space calls to order casual sweeps for anything."

"I had intended to tell you eventually anyway, Captain," she replied—a mite huffily, Kirk thought. "In any case, to observe the formalities, you may regard this as an official order from

Starfleet Central. More than those of us at Science Center are interested in these disappearances.

"I have priority override so far as the Carson's World-Bethulia III expedition is concerned. If the ore carrier captains try to make things difficult for you, refer them to me." She smiled wolfishly. "I'll see to it that they get satisfaction. They won't miss you for a few days."

Kirk didn't add that if the schedule of unexplained disappearances in the Cicada Sector held true, they might be missed for more than a few days. But he didn't say that. It could be interpreted in some quarters as insubordination.

Besides, he was getting interested.

"Very well, Admiral. We'll do our best to find your interstellar boojum." Van Leeuwenhook relaxed.

"I know you will, James. Discovery to you!"

The picture of the vice admiral began to fade, dissolve in a shower of confused electrical particles. Uhura's voice sounded over the grid.

"Transmission ended, sir. And just in time, we're nearly out of range."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." He snapped off the viewer and sat thinking. Not that he was superstitious or anything. These disappearances could be due to natural coincidence.

Sure they could, Kirk old chap. Once every twenty or thirty years. But every 27.344 star-years *exactly*?

He was tempted to beam directly to Starfleet Science Headquarters on Vulcan and talk to Admiral Weems himself, but he dismissed the idea as soon as it occurred. Even a Starfleet captain had better be very sure of himself and his reasons before trying to go around a vice admiral—even if only for clarification of detail.

Besides, if something was in the unknown sector that could take Romulan and Klingon ships as well as those belonging to the Federation, there might be valuable military information to gain. The fewer interceptable deep-space calls made on the matter, the better. He worked the communicator again.

"Mr. Spock . . . Mr. Sulu . . .?"

Both responded. "Spock, I'll be needing a lot of digging from you in a little while. Mr. Sulu, we have a new mission and

a new course. Take us to the spatial border of the port sector known as the Cicada region.

"What do you mean you never heard of it? *Tch-tch*, I'm disappointed in you, Mr. Sulu. I thought everyone had heard of the Cicada Sector. Better stay up on your manuals. Mr. Spock will supply you with navigational supplements for cruising within the area. The only charts will be about a hundred-fifty years old, Spock. Kirk out."

Now all he had to do was think out a way to tell the skippers of the ore carriers that their escort was going to take a hike.

II

Actually it took nearly twenty-five hours for them to penetrate the edge of the mystery sector. No giant galactic monster waited there to devour the ship whole. There were no signs of incomprehensible interstellar weapons manned by unknown races, no all-destroying automatic fortresses ready to blast them from known space.

There were stars in the sector, of course. According to the old schematics some of them had planets. But they were few and far between. They'd been cruising inside the sector for half a day now, and nothing vaguely like a threat had materialized.

"It certainly seems peaceful enough, Captain."

Kirk nodded, tried to relax in the command chair. He couldn't, of course. It hadn't been designed to put its occupant to sleep, but rather to keep him alert.

"How soon will we enter the so-called disappearance zone, Mr. Spock?"

"According to calculations, Captain, we have some thirty seconds to go."

Kirk steepled his fingers on his lap and stared at the main viewscreen. Only interstellar space, spotted with the pinpoints of stars near and distant, stared back. A black ocean, concealing its threats with a sheen of dark beauty.

"All we know," he muttered to himself, "is that ships have vanished in this sector every twenty-seven star-years. A long time for a pattern to hold." He glanced at the helm chronometer. The twenty remaining seconds were up.

"Lieutenant Uhura, place the ship on yellow alert"

"Something happening, sir?"

"No, purely precautionary, Lieutenant."

Uhura felt relieved. Not that she *expected* any trouble, but the regularity of ship disappearances in this area made her more than a little nervous. It didn't seem to bother the captain, though.

Kirk observed the cool demeanor of his communications officer and reflected how fortunate it was that his crew, at least, was not at all worried about this assignment.

"Aye, sir, yellow alert." Uhura swiveled lightly in her chair, manipulated controls. Throughout the bulk of the starship, proper lights changed color, necessary noises yowled warnings.

If there was a lurking, malevolent entity out there somewhere capable of reacting to this gently defiant gesture, it did not do so. Spock checked out the gratifyingly fast compliance of all decks with the order.

"All stations now operating in yellow alert status, Captain." Minutes passed. Still nothing. Kirk began to relax a little. He'd tightened up in spite of himself, but now that they were several minutes into the interference zone and nothing had appeared to volatize the deck beneath him, he felt assured in easing his vigilance.

Nervousness never failed to surprise him. Hadn't he been through all this before? He sighed—tenseness was an occupational disease.

No one noticed Uhura look up sharply from her console. There was a faint, distant sound in her earphones and, no doubt about it, the strange sound had begun the instant they'd crossed into the sensitive sector. But it had been so faint at first that she hadn't been sure.

It was growing rapidly louder, however. And there was no mistaking it for a natural output of any kind.

"Captain, I'm now picking up some kind of subspace radio signal."

Kirk accepted this news calmly, almost expectantly. So there was something here. But a radio signal was hardly cause for alarm.

"Put it on the ship's speakers, Lieutenant. Mr. Sulu, any chance this wavelength might interfere with navigation?"

"It doesn't seem so, sir. It's not anywhere near helm-length waves."

Uhura adjusted her controls. For a moment there was nothing. Then a familiar, wavering tone swelled from the wall speakers and filled the bridge.

It was sensuous, haunting and unmistakably melodic. A deep pulsing beat underlay the melody, a beat that might have been drawn straight from ancient terran drums. The wordless song itself sounded vaguely like guitars and flutes.

It was lovely.

It was rhapsodic.

It was thoroughly captivating.

At least one member of the bridge complement, however, wore an expression of something other than rapture. It was only a source of puzzlement to Uhura.

"It's much more like pure music than an intelligible message, Captain." It grew louder, and she dropped the volume to compensate for the increased power of the signal.

"Beautiful," Kirk murmured. "Might as well let everyone enjoy it, Uhura. Pipe it through the ship."

"Yes, sir." She didn't notice that the men on the bridge had entered into a state of musical appreciation bordering on Nirvana. They stopped just short of actually swaying in time to the alien rhythm. Even Spock had to force himself to concentrate on his computer readouts instead of on the music.

Helmsman Arex stared at distant stars, his three feet tapping a gentle rhythm in counterpoint to the music pouring over the speakers.

For long moments after the first faint pipings sounded over the speakers there was nothing, nothing but the steady sylphlike strains from the instruments of unknown players. Then Spock looked up from his viewer, surprised.

"Captain, we're being probed."

Kirk spoke slowly, with seeming difficulty. "From where . . . can you trace it?"

"A moment, Captain." Requests were put to the computer. "The signal is apparently originating in a star system some fifteen—no, twenty—light-years distant."

"Any info on it?" Again the library went to work.

A holographed star-chart replaced the speckled blackness of interstellar space on the viewscreen. Only two planetary

systems were shown on the old chart. One glowed with a faint red aura of its own.

"The Taurean system," Spock informed him. "A small G-type star at the extreme edge of this sector. It is the only star for many parsecs thought to possibly hold inhabitable planets. No surface survey was ever performed." The information succeeded in drawing Kirk's attention from the music.

"That's a mighty powerful signal to reach here from that distance," opined Scott. He looked over from the bridge engineering station as the music's tempo seemed to increase slightly . . . abruptly . . . insistently.

"Strange, Captain, I'm sure I'm ascribin' to it something that isn't really there—but it seems to be callin' us."

"It is odd," Kirk murmured. "Yes, I get the same feeling myself, Scotty."

Final confirmation of the signal's attractive power came from the least likely source.

"It does seem to have attributes not unlike a summons," Spock concluded. Only Uhura was unaffected. She studied the men on the bridge, thoroughly puzzled.

"I don't see any semblance to a summons, Captain." Kirk looked back and replied, rather curtly, she thought.

"Noted, Lieutenant. Lieutenant Arex, set our course for the Taurean system. Warp-factor seven."

Uhura tried to persuade herself that nothing was wrong with any of this. Certainly the alien music was interesting, distinctive—an appealing little tune. But a summons? A distant call to some as yet undefined action? Uh-uh.

She continued to monitor her communications console, but most of her attention was diverted to monitoring the actions of her fellow officers. All of them—Kirk, Scott, Sulu, even Arex, even Spock—wore dreamy, faraway looks. She'd seen similar expressions on the faces of music lovers before. But other forces were at work here, demanding more than mere appreciation from their listeners.

Or was something the matter with her?

It was as if she were the only one who was tone-deaf at a Mozart concert.

No, surely, there was nothing wrong with either her hearing or her sense of musical propriety. But she had to have a second opinion. Pressing a call switch she addressed the broadcast mike softly, whispering.

Not long after her call, the elevator doors divided and head nurse Christine Chapel entered the bridge. She took a fast survey of the room before moving quickly to stand next to Uhura.

"You wanted me, Lieutenant?" she asked quietly, putting a hand on Uhura's shoulder. The communications officer had admonished her to speak softly when she arrived on the bridge—not that anyone else seemed to have noticed her arrival. "Are you feeling all right?"

"*I* am," Uhura replied quietly. She nodded toward the center of the bridge. "But I want you to observe the men here."

"I do that anyway." Uhura didn't smile back. "What am I supposed to be looking for?"

"Just look, see if you draw any conclusions."

Puzzled, Chapel shrugged slightly and turned to comply with the request. She studied her superior officers.

Funny, no one was talking to anyone else. The usual idle chatter that filled the bridge was absent. There was only the strange music that had begun humming from the intraship communicators a little while ago. In fact, everyone present except Uhura seemed transfixed by an unseen hand.

Kirk and Sulu had risen from their seats. They were staring dreamily, distantly, into empty air. Yet their eyes were open and they smiled raptly. Chapel concluded that the music supplied more than aural stimulation.

"Beautiful images," murmured Sulu, confirming her guess.

What images?

Uhura and Chapel saw nothing. The communications officer looked up at her.

"It started the moment we picked up that signal. And it's gotten progressively worse. Look." She pointed towards the library computer station. "It's even affected Spock."

Unlike Sulu and Kirk, Spock remained seated at his station. But he, too, was staring trancelike into nothingness.

Nothingness only to Uhura and Chapel.

"Fascinating," Spock whispered. "Like a Vulcan marriage drum." The shimmering phantom dancing before his eyes began to take on stronger outlines, to solidify in space as his imagination lent it form and reality.

She had shining black hair which fell in silken cascades to her feet, pointed ears, and upswept eyebrows. Jeweled leotards clung to her body like a sparkling second skin. Strands of gems were entwined in that ebony mane, spitting out tiny fragments of rainbow as the light changed.

Now she languorously slid behind a small triangular drum. Her hands, delicate and pale, opened like white flowers. She started to play an unheard rhythm on its taut surface. No, not unheard! There it was now, he could hear it—clear and vibrant as she.

She started to sway alluringly, moving lazily from side to side as she played. Yes, he could hear it, jungle drums accented by picked guitars and delicate Vulcan tassans. But the sound was coming from the intercom, not from the drum, wasn't it? He blinked and spoke thickly. Words came slow and hard, as if he were trying to speak through buttermilk.

"I am experiencing audio-visual suggestion, Captain."

"So am I, Spock." Kirk's tone and attitude had become something less than authoritative.

She was beautiful. Her golden hair was piled high in metallic ramparts, shading a perfect forehead. A gentle breeze nudged the flowing peignoir close to her body, where it clung with maddening intent to high curves and angles.

She leaned toward him, eyes of deep blue staring, warm, inviting. The petals of the crimson flower that lay cupped in her hands opened to him. They were shaped to form a stylized heart.

Kirk shook himself.

"Dimensional visions, too." He frowned. "Any idea what's causing them, Spock?"

The science officer's eventual reply seemed to come from parsecs away. He was still staring, still absorbed in the tugging alien marriage music.

"Logically, we must assume they are a by-product of the scanning probe." All this would have seemed totally crazy to Uhura—if it weren't that everyone was treating it so seriously. But she couldn't keep silent any longer.

"Sir, what visions? We don't see anything." She indicated Nurse Chapel, who nodded agreement.

Somehow Kirk found the reserves to turn from his dancing mirage and look back at them. "Nurse Chapel, you're sure you don't see anything, either?"

"No, sir. Not a thing. What is it you all see?" Kirk ignored her question, turned his gaze to touch in turn on Sulu, Scott, Arex, and Mister Spock. All continued to stare into space, eyes blank and expressions slightly foolish. The image of his voluptuous blonde persisted, and Kirk had difficulty focusing on Uhura.

"Tell me, Lieutenant," he murmured curiously, "have I been looking as silly as that?"

Uhura hesitated, then spoke firmly. This was no time for diplomacy. "Every bit as vacuous, sir."

"Ummm." Kirk considered. It was growing hard to concentrate. No matter how he seemed to shift and turn, the blonde stayed in his vision.

"Nurse, take a medical reading. Lieutenant Uhura, call Dr. McCoy to the bridge."

Chapel moved away from the communications area and swung her medical tricorder off her shoulder. Since it was precalibrated for humans, she passed over Lt. Arex for the moment and began with a smirking Sulu. No telling what he saw, and she wasn't sure she cared to know.

Meanwhile, Uhura was busy at her console.

"Sick bay . . . Dr. McCoy, please report to the bridge . . . Dr. McCoy, please report to the bridge." She paused while Kirk waited unconcernedly, watching her. Giving him a puzzled look, she tried again.

"Dr. McCoy, report to the bridge—Sick Bay, acknowledge!" Nothing. She looked first at Kirk, then at Chapel, and shook her head. "No response."

"Keep trying, Lieutenant," Kirk ordered dreamily. At the moment he didn't seem to care whether McCoy answered or

not.

"Yes, sir."

In the reception office of the *Enterprise*'s central Sick Bay, the communicator call light winked on and off with mechanical patience, while Uhura's voice continued to sound from the attendant speaker. "Dr. McCoy . . . report to the bridge . . . Dr. McCoy . . ."

Dr. McCoy was sitting at his desk. Leaning back in his chair, he had his feet comfortably propped up on same and his arms folded behind his head. At the moment he was staring upwards, but his eyes paid no more attention to the ceiling than they did to the communicator call light. A beatific grin dominated his expression.

Dimly, a part of him was aware of the blinking green light and Uhura's distant, urgent voice. He ignored both with perfect equanimity. His mind was busy with more important things.

"Magnolias in blossom," he sighed. "Magnificent . . . such symmetry of form . . . beautiful . . ."

Uhura gave up trying to contact McCoy. She had a suspicion why he wasn't answering. If she was right, nothing short of general alarm would provoke the slightest response from the good doctor.

For a moment she considered giving the alarm on her own, but she wasn't quite ready to assume the authority. While unmistakably affected by the strange music, Kirk, Spock, and the other officers still seemed in control of their actions. She checked her exterior monitors. The readings they provided were not the ones she hoped to see.

"The probe is getting stronger, Captain." Hands adjusted amplifiers. Also, the rhythmic pulsing had grown more insistent, the melodic convolutions more involved and complex.

"Mr. Spock," Kirk ordered, "reevaluate your scanner readings," Spock's reply was sleepy, but quick.

"I have been doing just that, Captain, though this signal makes normal work difficult. Readings are still inconclusive. That it appeals directly to the subconscious desire is self-

evident. But how it relates to the music is as yet undetermined.

"It is odd that only the men appear to be affected by the probe's hallucinatory capabilities. May I suggest that perhaps . . ." His voice trailed off as he stared at the main viewscreen. Kirk was already looking that way.

The faint outline of a world began to grow visible. It increased rapidly in size on the screen. Because of some peculiarity in the ionosphere, the atmosphere had a faint golden hue. As it expanded further, the musical probe grew correspondingly louder—and louder—until it seemed to wash the entire bridge in waves of pure emotion.

The constant driving rhythm defied all Uhura's efforts to keep it at a manageable level. It seemed to emanate now, not from her speakers, but from the walls themselves.

There was a blinding flash of light and the bridge was suddenly bathed in a deep pink glow. At the same time the music rose to a deafening crescendo which momentarily paralyzed everyone. The startling fusion of brilliant color and sound vanished simultaneously.

As the last tints of pink faded from outraged retinas, the probe officially stopped. After the long bolero, the resultant silence was shocking. Kirk, Spock, and the other men continued to stare hypnotically at the screen and the small, brass-hued planet floating there.

"Cut speed, Mr. Sulu, and set us an orbit."

Sulu's reply was casual. "Aye, sir." Kirk rose from his chair and yawned.

"Mr. Spock, we will take a party and beam down to explore the surface. Inform Transporter Chief Kyle of the approximate nexus of the probe-signal generator. We'll try and set down there. Life-support belts, Mr. Spock?"

"It doesn't seem necessary, Captain," Spock replied after checking his scanners. "Everything appears conducive to humanoid life. It doesn't really matter."

Uhura nearly fell out of her seat at that. She could see that Spock's highly uncharacteristic casualness over such a vital question had shocked Nurse Chapel, too. No one else seemed to think it worthy of comment.

"Scotty, you're in charge till we return."

"Hmmm? Oh, okey-doke, Captain." Scott was staring cheerfully at the viewscreen, but Uhura had a hunch the fatuous grin on his face was directed at another sight.

Kirk and Spock left via the elevator. Moments later, they ambled casually into the transporter room. McCoy was already there, and the single security man Kirk had requested, Ensign Carver, arrived shortly after.

"Engineer Kyle . . . Engineer Kyle!" Kirk said, more insistently when the transporter chief failed to respond.

"What?" Kyle raised his head from cupped hands and smiled over at them. "Oh, it's you, Captain. How's things?"

"Pretty good, Chief, pretty good." He moved up into the transporter alcove. "Spock call you before we left the bridge? You can handle those coordinates?" Kyle nodded, grinned at Spock as though the science officer was a long-lost brother.

The other officers joined Kirk in the transporter. Everyone was smiling happily at one another, or at nothing in particular, or at some private thought. After several minutes of this, a touch of reality intruded on Kirk's dreaming.

"I don't want to put you out, Engineer," Kirk murmured easily, "but if you've got a spare moment, could you beam us down?"

"Sure, Cap'. Anything for you."

Fortunately, Kyle had performed this operation several thousand times before. He could have done it in his sleep—and that's just about what he was doing. His mind was not on his job, but he manipulated the transporter controls solely on instinct.

Hopefully, he wouldn't rematerialize Kirk. Spock, and the others a hundred meters above their touchdown point.

On the bridge, Scott moved slowly to the command chair and flopped into it with little grace. His brows drew together. For the briefest of moments he frowned, as if something, something, wasn't quite what it ought to be. Then his previous contentment returned, and a satisfied smile spread across his face. Almost indifferently, he thumbed the log activator.

"Ship's log . . . stardate 5483.8. Chief Engineer Scott in command." For some reason that struck him as particularly humorous. He giggled. Uhura's jaw dropped in disbelief.

"We are continuing to hold standard orbit around a planet in the Taurean system." The world in question drifted on the screen in front of him, holding his gaze. This sight was continually interrupted by other phantoms which flashed across his field of vision somewhere between his nose and the viewer. They tickled his consciousness like bubbles before vanishing, leaving only a thin pleasant memory behind.

Once it was an astonishing orchidlike flower, whose center was a face of delicate elfin beauty. Another time, he saw thousands of gold coins, clinking, tinkling, and bouncing metallically off one another, blowing along a sandy beach like leaves in a high wind. A third time a carved crystal goblet spewed out an endless waterfall of brilliantly faceted gemstones. Now and then, the facets revealed faces that had nothing to do with internal mineral structure.

He continued the entry happily, almost singing the words.

"Probes and sensors utilized subsequent to the departure of the landing party indicate there was once a vast civilization here." The back of his mind wondered if it mightn't be a good idea to report this to Kirk and Spock, down on the surface. Oh well, they should find evidence of same soon enough. Besides, what difference did it make? What difference did *anything* make?

A lithe female form seemed to rise from the contours of a mountain range now visible on the surface below. Ah, lovely, lovely!

"However, life readings of any kind were sparse and concentrated. Captain Kirk has beamed down with others to investigate. Oh, fantastic!" His voice dropped to a whisper even the sensitive log mike couldn't pick up.

There were two people on the bridge who saw no orchid faces, heard no wind-scattered lucre, no cascade of jewels. And it worried them.

They were busy at the library computer, intent and agitated. Uhura had been feeding the *Enterprise*'s brain a steady stream of questions. Now she studied the flow of words and

figures that formed the reply. Each new answer deepened her frown, increased her apprehension.

"These readings just don't match up with Spock's official report," she snapped. "So far I count three sensor readings that are off—two of them dealing with wavelengths of that probe. That's not like Spock."

She was damning herself now for not sounding the general alarm when she'd had the chance. It wouldn't do much good now. She glanced around at the rest of the bridge.

Sulu was sleeping, head down, on the navigation console. Lt. Arex occasionally patted all three hands together in the manner of a little boy, and Scott—Chief Engineer Scott—was ignoring the still-recording log and conducting a silent orchestra of his own. If she'd seen the instruments involved, even Uhura might have blushed. She used a remote to switch off the log.

No, their reaction to a general alarm would be somewhat less than devastating.

She turned back to the computer. There had to be an explanation buried somewhere in the sensor readings.

There had to be.

The temple reminded Kirk of a well-insulated Parthenon as viewed through a fun-house mirror. Basic architectural lines were there, but they conformed to no known earthly pattern. He couldn't even tell whether the marblelike facing, brilliant white with pink veins and black striations for contrast, was stone or metal. The top of the structure seemed to melt into a pink fog that swirled gently in the light air.

A moment before, several small mist-shrouded forms had coalesced in front of the structure to leave Kirk, Spock, McCoy, and Carver standing just at its base.

It seemed they'd forgotten their life-support belts. Tch! It could have been fatal, but Spock's easygoing assumption as to the planet's congeniality turned out to be correct. By now any outsider would be justified in questioning their sanity, but none of the men affected seemed to find the oversight worth mentioning.

Spock had remembered to bring his tricorder, however. The security guard had one, too, and McCoy had a medical 'corder in addition to his standard emergency kit.

Their gaze never strayed from the temple. They stared in admiration at the arching columns of polished stone/metal, at the delicate, gravity-defying arches.

"Fantastic architecture," Kirk murmured. "Only an incredibly advanced race could have built this place." He didn't seem to find it particularly significant that the temple might be made of stone instead of duralloy or some equally technologically advanced structural material.

His opinion of the astonishingly advanced civilization of this world was echoed by the other members of the landing party. Carver turned to Kirk and gestured at his own tricorder. He appeared to be having some trouble speaking. What was wrong with the enlisted ranks these days?

"You want the routine post-landing checks made, sir?"

"Oh, I don't think that's necessary, Carver," Kirk replied easily. "Why go to all that trouble? There aren't any threats here." His assurance bothered no one. "Spock can handle any required scans."

Fortunately, the science officer's judgment was less affected than the captain's. He was already taking readings. That didn't keep him from staring at the temple, nor did it make his voice less distant and dreamy.

"There's something compelling about it, Captain."

"Yes." There was no music now, no all-absorbing rhythm pounding in their ears, but Spock was right. Something was pulling at them!

Kirk took a half-step backwards and frowned. Spock continued to work with his tricorder and abruptly he also seemed to realize something had taken an unpleasant grip on them.

"Captain, the urgency of the attraction suggests that more than mere visual compulsion is at work here. I advise remaining at a distance until I can determine the depth and significance of this influence. Life forms are indicated—concentrated at some point within this structure."

Kirk's trancelike expression intensified, and the momentary feeling of unease vanished. He seemed to hesitate, looking around for—something. But when his gaze finally returned to the temple, it stayed there—fixed.

"There's no apparent danger, Spock. A belligerent life form would already have sallied out to attack us. Let's go." He moved quickly now, even eagerly, towards the temple steps.

McCoy and Carver needed no urging and followed close on his heels. Spock followed more warily.

It was all very logical, of course. That wasn't the trouble. The trouble was that his logic was leading him down possible lines he didn't care for. But something at work here had a way of muffling the normal lines of reason. Spock almost seemed to have cause and effect tied together, and then everything would sort of blur in his mind.

Huge, intricately carved doors were recessed into the front of the temple. As soon as the men from the *Enterprise* had approached to within a few steps, the doors began to swing silently inward. That in itself should have been cause for greater caution. But Kirk led them inside as though they'd been expected for a long, long time.

They walked down a high, narrow hall which gradually opened into a huge audience chamber. Huge, hammock-like settees filled with silken cushions and high, cube-shaped tables of red-gold were set on both sides of the chamber. Various ornaments and utensils carved from single gems studded the tables and walls.

Always they moved toward a high, cushioned dais at the far end of the chamber. The aliens were there, waiting for them.

Resting on the dais itself or standing in a semicircle around it were a cluster of the most breathtakingly beautiful women any of them had ever seen or imagined. They wore long, togalike costumes which tantalized more than concealed. A few lounged on thick cushions covered with fur.

Like everything else on this world, their skins seemed tinged with a combination of gold and pink. All the colors of the rainbow gleamed in their flowing waist-length hair. Their eyes were a deep, drowning violet.

All stood about two and a half meters tall.

When they eventually moved it was slowly, and with great care and with deliberate patience. The reactions of the landing party were similar.

"Radiant . . . like goddesses . . . such eyes!" came the varied whispered comments. Even Spock was overwhelmed. He did, however, retain enough presence of mind to borrow McCoy's medical tricorder. The good doctor didn't seem to need it.

A quick scan brought some interesting information.

"The form—as is obvious—is humanoid," he murmured. "But there are a number of internal differences of indeterminate significance. Endocrinology especially appears to operate at variance with the humanoid norm. Also, their bodies appear to function at a surprisingly high electrical level.

"According to the tricorder the range of psychokinestatics—outside influences having an actual effect on bodily function—is abnormally high."

"Prettiest body functions I ever saw," McCoy mumbled, utterly enthralled.

For their part, the reactions of the women as they rose and slowly surrounded the men were equally ecstatic.

"They are here . . . such wondrous ones . . . they honor us with their presence . . ." and similar phrases not calculated to lower the ego of any masculine listener.

It all puzzled Spock, briefly, only because their reactions were exactly what one might dream for. It was ideal—too ideal. Too perfect. That didn't keep him from abandoning himself to it completely.

The crewmen had to lean backward to maintain eye contact as the tallest of the women stepped forward and extended her hand to each of them in turn. Her voice rang like prayer bells sounding through Lhasa.

"I am Theela," and the very name seemed to hint of warmth and love, "the head female. Welcome, James Kirk, Dr. McCoy, Mr. Spock, Ensign Carver. Welcome, honored ones."

"Welcome, honored ones!" came the heavenly chorus from the assembled women.

Kirk mumbled some suitably mushy reply, the sentiment, if not the actual words, echoed by his companions—including

Spock. It was fortunate no recorder was on to set down their words for posterity. Their infantile responses would never come back to haunt them.

They didn't sound infantile at the time, however. They sounded delightfully appropriate.

"How do you know our names?"

"The *Oyya* revealed you to us," Theela explained. She turned to face a shockingly blue curtain shot through with silver wire. Instead of touching a switch or giving a signal, she hummed a single soft, distinctive note. The curtain responded by sliding silently aside.

Jutting out from the wall behind the curtain was a large transparent cube. In its center floated a perfect three-dimensional model—no, not model, a picture, image, whatever label one could think of—of the *Enterprise*. More perfect than any hologram, it was so real it seemed the ship itself had been reduced in size and set into the cube.

The landing party moved closer, eyeing the device with real interest. As an example of alien engineering it was intriguing, but not quite spectacular. Although there were aspects of it which were unfamiliar—no Federation instrument could produce quite so realistic a depiction, for example—the technology required to produce it was not beyond comprehension.

But those few aspects bothered Spock. That, and the sophistication of such a machine in comparison with its basically barbaric surroundings. They did not add up.

"Tonal control," he murmured sleepily. "Quite impressive." Theela moved close and put a hand on his shoulder, looking down at him.

"The *Oyya* will reveal the answer to whatever is asked of it, Mr. Spock."

Spock was skeptical, but before he could ask questions Theela moved away from him to stand next to Kirk.

"We are grateful you heard the signal, Captain, and responded."

Signal . . . there was something about a signal. Something was hammering insistently at the back of his skull, screaming for attention. He shunted it angrily aside.

Signal . . . they were here in the first place because of . . . why were they here?

"That signal—it was a distress call?" Kirk asked.

Theela's smile faded. For a second a terrible sadness seemed to come over her. Then she quickly forced cheerfullness back into her voice.

"I will explain its meaning later, Captain. For now, we have prepared a feast to celebrate your coming—and your safe arrival."

Kirk would have pursued the matter further. He wanted to—it seemed he ought to—but somehow, in the face of Theela's radiant smile and the proximity of her body, the questions lost their initial urgency.

Several women guided each man to one of the swaying, overstuffed hammocks, helped him gently into it. Others brought elaborate golden trays piled high with exotically colored fruits, and white-gold chalices filled with cool bubbling drink.

Two or three women clustered around each man. They began to eat and drink. Especially choice tidbits were chosen for the visitors from the mountain of food.

One swarthy giantess rose and took several round gold fruits from a crystal bowl. "My name is Darah, honored ones," she whispered sensuously. She moved to the center of the chamber.

There she began juggling the fruits while simultaneously starting a wild, barely controlled dance. Performed by anyone else the combination would have seemed ludicrous. But Darah's movements turned it into an incredibly alluring ballet.

Kirk and his companions watched. Theela had knelt at his feet and was stroking his bare legs above the boottops. From unseen instruments, heady music throbbed. If possible, the women now seemed more beautiful, more exotic, more alive than ever. Very much more alive.

"Captain's log," Kirk sighed heavily, not caring whether or not a tricorder was running to pick it up, "stardate 5483.9. The beauty of this place is unequalled. It's the answer to all a man's secret desires, private fantasies, dreams. Exquisite in

every way." He paused drowsily and managed to get the chalice to his lips for another sip of the champagnelike liquid.

"We're here to investigate . . . here to investigate." He almost frowned. A last warning tried to sound, faded quietly behind a wall of suffocating pink flesh. "To investiga . . ." Theela made a deft move with her hips, and he smiled.

"The women themselves radiate delight." He watched as Darah continued her juggling dance, moving quickly, easily, back and forth across the chamber floor. McCoy fervently seconded Kirk's unrecorded sentiments.

"Truly, Theela, you are the most beautiful women in the galaxy. But where are your men?"

"They have their own temple, their own compound," the giantess informed him. "We find it better this way. We are thus free to pursue our own pleasures and fulfill our own needs without harassment from the other."

"I'll drink to that," McCoy bubbled.

Darah, her filmy toga flying in loose folds from her magnificent form, spun across the floor toward them. Suddenly, she called out laughingly.

"Mr. Spock!" She tossed one of the golden fruits toward him.

"I'll drink to that," echoed McCoy.

Spock rose automatically to catch, reeled dizzily and nearly fell over. Theela and several of the other women caught him before he struck the floor.

Kirk was halfway out of his hammock and starting toward Spock, his increasing lethargy finally interrupted by his friend's plight. He got only a few steps before he found himself swaying unsteadily. It finally penetrated the rose-colored haze that had enshrouded him that something was wrong here.

McCoy and Carver were also on their feet, but barely. Neither was in any condition to help anyone but himself. Other women rushed to their assistance.

"Take them to the slumber chambers," Theela directed. "They are tired and heavy with food and drink. They must rest."

There was no malice in her voice, nothing threatening, only honest concern for their well-being. It didn't make sense that

they'd been drugged, tricked. And the giantess's reaction was hardly one of triumph.

With a pair of women supporting each, of them, the men of the *Enterprise* were led, staggering, toward a side corridor. McCoy managed to gasp something intelligible, but his words were badly slurred.

"Prob . . . probably that nectar, or whatever it was they gave us to drink. It's as potent as Saurian brandy."

"I'll drink to that," mimicked Carver sarcastically. Of the four, he was the last one who should have succumbed to the lure of alien liquor. Some security man! He was blaming himself needlessly. They'd all been fooled.

McCoy looked as if he wanted to say more, but couldn't. Now he was almost wholly under the effects of the powerful drink.

None of them could see very well either. None of them looked back. And so none of them saw Theela staring after them, sadly. Tears were beginning to trail from the corners of her wide violet eyes.

III

They slept for a long time in the slumber chamber. It was dimly lit, but filled with luxurious furnishings and ornamentation. Kirk lay asleep on an enormous cushioned couch veiled with iridescent black curtains that shut him off from the rest of the room.

A gold headband with a large blue gem set in its center encircled his head. The gem did not sparkle in the dim light. His sleep had been deep, dreamless—but now he found himself stirring and trying to sit up.

The result of these efforts was a wave of dizziness that sent him falling back onto the cushions. A hand moved shakily to his head, touched, examined. He felt the headband. Experimentally he grabbed it as best he could and tugged. The pull failed to dislodge it. It was tight—too tight.

Both hands now. There didn't seem to be any kind of clasp or latch. Maybe he could force it apart along some hidden seam. Useless, it was locked firmly in place.

This time when he tried to sit up he managed it, though it cost him another attack of dizziness. He felt vaguely nauseated. Once more he worked feebly at the headband.

That's when he heard the voice. It was urgent and anxious.

"Jim . . . Jim . . .!"

Funny, that sounded like McCoy. But there was a subtle difference. Even when drunk the doctor's voice had never been that—well, that shaky.

A hand divided the smooth spun curtains. McCoy stood framed in the opening, swaying unsteadily. A headband identical to Kirk's own was wrapped tightly around his forehead. Kirk's eyes widened. His jaw dropped.

McCoy's hair was much thinner—and graying! He stood now with a noticeable stoop and his face, his face was lined like that of a man of sixty. But an even greater shock was in store.

Spock joined them a moment later. He still stood upright, but there was a definite flutter in his hands. His hair was also

tinged with gray. While he definitely looked older, he wasn't in the state of advanced desiccation that had afflicted McCoy. Vulcans generally had a longer lifespan than humans. Therefore the peculiar aging disease had affected Spock less than McCoy.

In the background, Kirk could see a greatly matured Carver. For the first time, he wished he'd brought a younger security guard with them. Even so, Carver was younger than any of them, so it appeared the aging effect wasn't proportional. Carver had aged faster than any of them.

It was almost as if he'd had more to give.

Kirk rose and eyed them in turn, still stunned.

"Bones . . . Spock . . . what's happened to you?"

"Not just to us, Jim," said McCoy quietly in that old man's voice. "You too."

Kirk swayed. McCoy's statement penetrated—not without resistance. His hand came up to touch his own face. His hand—dry, wrinkled. Drier, less supple skin on his cheeks, loose folds of flesh around his neck, under his eyes—lines that didn't belong there. That hadn't been there, hours ago.

He couldn't see the streak of white that ran through his hair, but McCoy told him about it.

"You look about fifty, Jim. I'd guess Spock's artificially advanced age at about the same, though he's got more years to play with than us."

"We've got to get out of here," Kirk stuttered desperately. He'd once seen a man who'd lost his suit on Dryad, the hothouse world in the Demeter system. The man had made it to a survival base. When the rescue team finally reached him, they found only a very large man-shaped fungus spotted with short, sprouting, brown tendrils.

McCoy's seamed face was every bit as shocking.

He started to run for the remembered exit and pulled up, grabbing at his left leg. It seemed that in the past few hours he'd not only acquired wrinkled hands and face and a streak of white in his hair, but also a mild case of bursitis.

He felt unbelievably helpless.

Uhura and Chapel stared down at the readout screen of the main medical computer in Sick Bay. They mentally tried to urge the machine to greater speed. As if in response to their unvoiced pleas, a microtape cassette promptly popped out of the response slot.

Chapel picked it up and both women moved to the desk playback table. She inserted the small plastic rectangle, hit the necessary switch. She spoke to Uhura as the machine automatically rewound the unplayed tape.

"The results of every scan, every probe made by the female science teams. If there's an answer it'll be on this." The accompanying screen winked on and there was a tiny hum as the computer voice activated.

"Computer evaluating." The two officers took a deep breath. "Summation of recent medical and astrophysical scans, with analysis, as per request Head Nurse C. Chapel."

Faint sounds of mechanical life followed. Each second took an hour. Then the voice finally came again, indifferent as it was authoritative.

"Probe is directed at ship from indicated planet, as initially surmised. Probe wavelengths are severely enervating to humanoid males. Prolonged, exposure to probe's effects over a long period of time, or if signal is intensified according to figures shown on chart, can cause increasing weakness and accelerated aging to the point of death."

Chapel made a slight strangled noise and Uhura looked stunned.

"At least we've some idea now what we're dealing with," the communications officer said grimly. She directed her next words to the computer pickup. "How do we counter this effect?"

"Countering methodology not available. No projected medical antidote to hypothesized effects. Initiate search?"

"Initiate—and keep advised," ordered Uhura sharply. She moved to the wall communicator as Chapel ran through the figures once again.

"Lieutenant Uhura to Security Officer Davidson." A middle-aged, efficient-looking woman appeared on the tiny intraship screen.

"Davidson here. What's going on Lieutenant? The men in my section have been . . ."

". . . acting like lotus-eaters ever since we entered orbit, I know. I'll explain later, Davidson. Right now I want an all-female security team in the main transporter room as of five minutes ago. All-female security teams are to be mobilized at every entrance to the transporter deck and in the shuttle bay. Anyone—particularly any *male*—who attempts to transport down to the surface is to be placed in protective custody. I don't think any of them will become violent—we've no indications of that so far. But instruct your personnel to be prepared."

"Yes, Lieutenant, but—"

"You and Lieutenant M'ress will be in command of the ship until I return. I'm taking down a security detail myself."

"As you say, Lieutenant." Davidson looked doubtful, but saluted briskly. Uhura cut the transmission and turned to Chapel; she found the head nurse staring at her with wide eyes.

"What are you planning, Uhura?" The latter was already heading for the elevator.

"I'm taking command of this ship!"

Kirk, Spock, McCoy, and Carver stood in the audience chamber facing the imposing dais. Theela sat there, watching them. Darah and the other women relaxed nearby, also watching. The men swayed weakly, the blue gems set in their headbands now glowing brightly.

Only Spock and Carver were a step above total collapse. Kirk and McCoy were in bad shape.

"We must return," the *Enterprise*'s first officer murmured tiredly, "to our duties on board our ship." Next to him, Kirk frowned uncertainly. He was clearly straining to remember . . . to remember . . . what?

Duties—that was it, duties. He looked up at the staring women. "Duties . . . I have . . ." He stumbled again as the jewel pulsed brightly and had to grab at Spock's arm for support. That arm was not what it should have been and as a result, both men nearly fell.

Theela spoke. She seemed genuinely sorry, no longer adequate consolation to Kirk and his men. "You cannot leave, Mr. Spock," she said slowly, "for you are needed here. As the low waves of the Lura-mag work on your crew, they will come to feel as you do. They are also needed, and they too will join us here."

Kirk drew himself up, finding a last reserve of strength somewhere. "We must go." Turning toward the door he staggered off. McCoy tried to follow and nearly collapsed. Again, it was Spock who steadied him.

"Obstruct them!" Theela shouted.

The other women moved rapidly to form a barrier between Kirk and the other officers, blocking their path to the main exit. Shaking with stabbing, suddenly increased weakness the men hesitated. They had nothing to fight with, their weapons having been taken from them while they slept.

"Together!" Kirk gasped. Somehow they managed to rush the women. But the giantesses grabbed their arms and pushed and dragged them back easily. Their weakness seemed to increase sharply at the physical contact, and they grabbed at their headbands. One by one they slumped helplessly to the floor. On each man's forehead the blue gem shone with appalling intensity.

On the bridge of the *Enterprise*, Engineer Scott lounged dreamily in the command chair. His eyes were focused on the viewing screen and the dreamworld that seemed to be depicted therein. A constant flow of sensuous, beckoning images drifted back and forth in front of him.

The Scottish beret he now wore was tilted at a rakish angle. He was singing an old Gaelic love ballad. Normally, Sulu would have found the rendition distasteful and Arex would have been indifferent. But both seemed to find Scott's performance the greatest musical experience since Gabriel.

Uhura and Chapel entered from the elevator. The lieutenant's gaze was drawn immediately to Scott. The ballad approached its end as the two officers approached.

She'd been dreading this moment. How would Scott react? Regardless of any objections, he had to be removed from

command—by force, if necessary. In his present condition there was no telling what he might order. She hoped Chapel wouldn't be forced to use the hypo secreted in her belt. There was no hesitation in her voice, however.

"Mr. Scott, as senior lieutenant I'm taking responsibility for the safety of this ship."

Scott turned at these astonishing words and stared up at her. There was an awkward silence. Uhura fidgeted inwardly. Was the strange probe capable of inducing emotions other than pleasure?

Apparently not. Scott merely smiled absently up at her.

"That's very thoughtful of you, luv." He swiveled in his chair and returned his gaze to the viewscreen. Uhura should have been relieved. Instead, she felt only disgust.

"Not as hard as I expected it might be. Damn. Whatever it is, it's really got its hooks into them." She reached around the humming engineer and switched on the log 'corder. Scott made no move to interfere—not that he was in any shape to offer resistance.

"Ship's log, supplemental. Lieutenant Uhura recording.

"Due to Chief Engineer Scott's euphoric state of mind, which precludes effective direction, I am assuming command of the *Enterprise* in the absence of senior officers Kirk, Spock, and McCoy. I accept full responsibility for my actions.

"A detailed account of the events leading up to and dictating this action will be entered later." Off went the recorder and she added to Chapel, "I hope. Christine, until further notice you will serve as chief medical officer."

"Yes, Lieutenant."

In a small chamber somewhere within the main temple, Kirk, Spock, McCoy, and Carver lay stretched out on a huge slumber platform. It was neither as spacious nor as lavishly furnished as their former "slumber chamber." All four were groggy from sleep.

They were apparently alone in the tiny, dark room. There was little light, but it wasn't dark enough to prevent each man from seeing that his companions had aged even further in the last hour.

McCoy's hair was now almost pure white, while Spock's eyebrows were salted with gray. There were deeper lines in Kirk's face, heavy pouches under his eyes. He rolled over on his side and studied the room.

"They've gone."

"Yes," agreed Spock. Experimentally, he stood, testing his aged muscles. Kirk and Carver imitated him. Spock walked over and gestured at McCoy's waist.

"Your medikit, Doctor. Does it contain anything that might help us?"

McCoy glanced down at the belt in surprise. Sure enough, his compact medikit was still strapped in place and seemed to be intact.

"I wonder why they took everything else and let me keep this?"

"Perhaps because it cannot be used either as a weapon or for communication, Doctor."

"How would they know that?"

"If their question to the device they call the *Oyya* was phrased so as to only indicate those instruments, then the machine would, as is the nature of machines, not volunteer additional information. We are lucky.

"I have seen no evidence of practical medicine here," the science officer continued. "This entire community of women is a most peculiar mixture of the ancient and ultramodern. No doubt they assume your kit contains only food supplements or hygienic materials."

"They'll be hygienic, all right!" McCoy fumbled at his waist and pulled out a short, thick cylinder with tiny studded dials running down one side. "Cortropine. It ought to help. It's a powerful stimulant—but it'll make its demands later. Not the safest stuff in the world to use."

"There may not be a later if we don't use it, Bones." Kirk slid off the platform. "I'll take the first shot."

McCoy administered a dose to the captain's upper arm. Kirk rubbed at his tingling bicep and began to examine their prison in detail. McCoy continued handing out doses of the fast-working drug to Spock and then Carver.

Kirk found the door, tried it. Not surprisingly, it didn't budge. A close examination of its edges revealed that it was designed to open outward.

"Locked," he offered unnecessarily. McCoy placed the cylinder against his left arm and gave himself the final jolt. He started to replace the cylinder in the open medical pouch, but Spock stopped him. The science officer began examining the kit's contents with interest.

"What's this, Doctor?" He lifted a thin piece of hinged metal from a plastic tube.

"Portable surgical probe, Spock. The tip's full of impulsors and fragment manipulators."

"Good enough." Spock opened the instrument to its full length and moved to the door. Kirk stepped aside. In response to the captain's unvoiced question, Spock gestured at the door with the probe. "This appears to be a magnetic seal. If so, the slight output of the doctor's probe may be sufficient to disrupt the locking field."

He selected a narrow tip and inserted its slim prong into the nearly flush join of door and wall. Moving it up from the floor slowly, it rose until clicking against something set at eye level. Spock lifted an eyebrow in satisfaction. He activated the tiny power supply.

Nothing happened.

Manipulating it carefully, occasionally activating another setting, he turned and poked the impulsor prong back and forth against the lock.

There was no snap, no sound at all. The door panel moved away quietly, just far enough to let them squeeze out of the room. Spock gave the probe back to McCoy who carefully refolded it and replaced it in its receptacle in the medikit. They might have occasion to use it again.

Spock led the way with Kirk and the others close behind. A surprisingly short walk down the narrow corridor and they came to a thin curtain backed with brilliant light.

Kirk edged ahead of Spock and glanced carefully around one edge of the thin fabric. They were back at the audience chamber. The enormous room was deserted.

Putting finger to lips he led them forward, heading as quickly as he could for the main entrance. The main entrance? Kirk had a disquieting thought.

The doors had appeared to be automatic when they first entered. If they weren't, the four men would have had a terrible time trying to move them manually, even at full strength. He needn't have worried.

When they were less than two meters from the towering stone/metal, the thick doors began to swing aside. Quietly they moved down the outer steps.

Theela chose that moment to enter the audience chamber from a side corridor. She spotted them just as the doors began to close behind the fugitives.

"Assistance, assistance!"

Already the four old men were in the garden that surrounded the temple. It was delicate, tasteful, maintained like a fine clock. However now the polished trees, the neatly pruned bushes, all looked threatening and alien.

Shortly they found themselves breathing with increasing difficulty. The cortropine was beginning to wear off even sooner than Kirk had hoped.

"It's our aged bodies, Jim," gasped McCoy. "The drug is less effective because it has so much less to work with."

They were losing strength rapidly. Already Spock had to assist McCoy. Kirk found himself searching desperately for a cave, an easily climbable tree, any place that could serve as a temporary refuge. But the only asylum in sight was a huge urn magnificently inlaid with ceramic mosaic.

He gagged, cleared his throat. "The big urn, it's the only place!" Then he turned to McCoy.

"Bones, another dose of the drug." McCoy shook a withered hand.

"Another shot in our present condition would be fatal, Jim. Even if I had it."

They hurried to the base of the urn. The curving upper edge seemed to tower over their heads, the smooth convex sides an insurmountable barrier.

"I think I can make it," was all Spock said. He backed off a few steps, took a short run, leaped, and managed to catch

one of the big projecting handles near the top. He straggled and succeeded in pulling himself up to a sitting position on the outthrust handle.

A quick glance showed that the interior of the urn was spacious, relatively clean—and empty. It was covered with a heavy metal grid, but they should be able to move that. He locked his legs tightly around the handle and reached down.

With the others helping from below he was able to get McCoy alongside. They had to hurry. Already the women were racing into the first trees, splitting up to cover the many paths.

Theela noticed a tiny flash of red that was part of no plant. She moved closer and saw it was a piece of torn fabric. Reaching down, she picked it free. No question, it was from one of the alien male's uniforms.

Turning, she cupped her hands and yelled. "Over here, this way!" Without waiting to see if her comrades had heard, she started up the path that curved 'round the bush. Long strides ate distance quickly—and time.

Once, she glanced at the sky. It was growing dark. A typically sudden Taurean storm was coming. The rain could aid the escape of the men. She would have to hurry.

Carver was lowered carefully into the urn. McCoy was let down next. Quickly Kirk helped lower Spock into the waiting hands of McCoy and the security guard.

Then only Kirk was left on top. He unhitched his legs from around the bracing handle and started forward, grabbing for the lip of the rim—he grabbed and missed. His fingers slipped on the slick surface. For a horrible moment he found himself sliding helplessly down the smooth porcelain.

Only a last, desperate grab enabled him to clutch the projecting handle. A supreme physical effort brought him back onto the top of the urn.

"Captain, are you all right?" came Carver's concerned voice. Kirk couldn't spare the wind for a reply. He felt at least a thousand years old.

He made another, more careful approach to the opening. This time both hands got a firm grip on the rim. Pulling

painfully and scrambling with his knees, he tried to pull himself up and over.

A sound came to his ears—the sound of running feet, getting closer. That was sufficient to spark a redoubled effort. A final, agonizing pull which closed the heavy grid over the opening—and he fell headfirst into the urn. Spock and Carver barely retained enough strength to keep him from smashing into the unyielding bottom.

Darah and two other women came into the small glade, searching every direction. There was no sunlight left in the gathering darkness to throw an accusing glare off the polished ceramic. The three separated and moved off in different directions.

Feeling more alone than he'd felt in his life, Kirk stood inside the urn and listened to voices and footsteps moving back and forth outside the urn.

"They're not here, Theela," one voice exclaimed. The leader's reply came quickly.

"Come, they might have tried to return to the spot where they arrived!" Footfalls and voices faded into distance.

Inside the urn the officers exchanged relieved glances. That was when Kirk, the temporary respite restoring a bit of his normal alertness, noticed something:

"Our headbands, look at them!" Sure enough, the once brilliant blue gems set in the hellish headbands were now only dull, faceted rocks. They no longer fluoresced with some alien internal heat. The men inspected one another carefully. Not one of the headbands showed a hint of light.

Spock had puzzled over the phenomenon of the glowing gems since he had first become aware of them. He'd formed a theory, and the present absence of light seemed to confirm it.

"I've noticed that the glow diminishes when the women are not present. I believe," he continued, his voice but not his words emotionless, "that they are polarized conductors of some sort, which transfer our vital energy to their bodies."

"Life-force feeders?" queried a doubtful McCoy. "Among some primitive parasitic species it's been noted, yes, but here . . .?" He looked faintly sick.

Spock nodded. "That is the explanation I can think of which ties our advanced—no, enforced—aging to these devices." He tapped his own headband.

"You may also recall, Doctor, that when we first encountered them, these women appeared slow-moving and listless. But as our own strength has failed, they have become far more energetic and vital."

"More alive," murmured McCoy. "Yes, I see it now. Stupid of me not to see it before. How stupid!"

"Do not blame yourself, Doctor. You are in a far more weakened condition than I. Your powers of observation have decreased commensurate with your physical decline."

Kirk looked thoughtful. "If they find us, Spock, how much longer would we have?"

"It is impossible to tell for certain without a tricorder or medical computer to confirm, Captain, but we seem to be aging roughly ten years per day. More in the presence of the women. This is, of course, only a guess."

No one said anything. No one needed to. Not after McCoy voiced the feelings of all of them in a single, taut sentence.

"Ten years per—in four days well all be dead!"

"Dead," Kirk nodded angrily, "and useless to them. Not that they'll care. Theela said the other men of the *Enterprise* would join us. They'll be lured, drawn down here by the probe and the pull of their own imaginations.

"We've got to contact the ship somehow. We must get to a communicator." Kirk put a hand against the hard concave walls and made a testing leap for the rim. He came close, but the effort exhausted him so much that he nearly collapsed. Obviously no one was going to make it out of their hiding place without the help of the others.

"I've retained more strength than any of you," said Spock, stating the obvious. Carver might have disputed him, but chose not to. "My internal system is different, Captain, my life cycle longer. It would be wiser if I go alone to the temple to try and find the communicators and contact the ship."

Kirk found himself reluctantly agreeing. "One man would stand a better chance of slipping past them than four. Still—"

"It is the only logical thing to do, Captain."

Kirk hesitated, searching for a better way. There was no route around the obvious, however.

It took the combined remaining strength of Carver and Kirk to lift Spock until he could grip the outer rim and push aside the grid. McCoy was too weak to offer other than moral support. Somehow Spock maintained his grasp, pulled himself up (pushing the grid back in place so that the others would escape detection) and over the top.

Panting heavily, Spock rested there and surveyed the glade. No one was in sight, for which he was thankful—though he wouldn't have objected, say, to the sudden appearance of a heavily armed Vulcan peaceforcer car.

It took more of his fading reserves to lower himself safely and carefully to the ground. No logic in escaping their refuge only to break a leg in climbing down.

Moving as rapidly as he dared and trying to keep under cover all the way, he headed for the temple. Once a pair of giantesses crossed close in front of him and he was forced to crouch under a bush whose waxy red blossoms he admired more for their concealing size than for their color.

At least the Taureans didn't appear to have an extraordinary sense of smell.

Once again it occurred to him that they seemed in no way up to creating the incredibly advanced sensory equipment which had been used on the men of the *Enterprise*. There was only one explanation: forgotten knowledge was at work on this world.

Spock made it to the temple without further incident. Fortunately the doors were still open. Obviously this was the last place they expected the refugees to return to. The urge to dash inside was overpowering, but he paused long enough to peer cautiously around one huge marblelike pillar. Nothing moved in the vast audience hall.

The corridors branching off from the main chamber also seemed to be deserted. All the women were outside, hunting them. Hunting *him*.

A search of the first, luxurious slumber chamber produced nothing, not a single piece of their missing equipment. A thorough inspection of the central dais from which Theela had

greeted them proved equally fruitless. There were plenty of interesting devices around, but none of starfleet issue.

He was getting desperate when he passed the blue curtain concealing the *Oyya*.

If the machine possessed some kind of internal alarm system to warn of unauthorized users, he'd give himself away. But they had to have a communicator!

He thought, then hummed what he hoped was the right note. The curtain didn't move. He didn't think it would shift aside manually. It was made of metal, not fabric, and looked heavy. He tried again, still with no effect.

But the third whistle seemed to catch the pitch of Theela's voice precisely. Somewhere an ancient piece of machinery agreed. The azure screen slid aside, revealing a now transparent, empty cube. The *Oyya*.

He hesitated. Would it respond to his voice? But Theela had spoken to it in terranglo and as much as offered them a chance to try it.

Answer any question, would it?

"The equipment belonging to the men of the *Enterprise*," he asked firmly, "where is it?"

There was no blur of shifting mists in the cube, no incomprehensible alien visual static. One moment the cube was as transparent as a block of lucite, the next it showed a three-dimensional miniature of a familiar object—the dais at the far end of the audience chamber.

With one difference. There was a panel set into the left side of the platform's base, and it was open in the miniature. Spock wouldn't have known how to replace the curtain even if he'd wanted to. Anyway, he didn't have time. He rushed to the dais.

A minute of frantic exploration around the paneled area revealed a large button set into the metal. He pressed it and the panel cover slid obediently aside, revealing the priceless treasure within.

Tricorders, phasers, rechargers—all their missing equipment was there. He fumbled first for a communicator, frowning when a first grab missed badly. His vision was becoming weaker.

A second try, and the compact instrument was firmly in hand. He flipped it open.

"Spock to *Enterprise*." At that moment he felt rather than saw the crystal in his headband begin to brighten. There was some residual heat put out by it after all. As the glow intensified he swayed, suddenly dizzy. Was he too weak even to talk anymore? Had he even uttered the call?

Uhura's voice echoed back from the orbiting heaven of the starship.

"*Enterprise* . . . Lieutenant Uhura here! Spock, is that you? Spock!" He glanced toward the front of the chamber. There were footsteps.

Several giantesses were just coming through the doors. Apparently they'd failed to locate Kirk, McCoy, and Carver and were returning to ask aid of the *Oyya*. They saw Spock. One shouted and they began to run forward. He tried to shake himself and spoke rapidly into the communicator.

"Request rescue party—all female, emphasize, all female!" "Repeat," he added desperately, summoning his remaining strength. The room was starting to spin. "All female party . . . all . . ."

His knees buckled like soft cheese and he slumped to the stone floor. The women encircled him.

IV

Uhura was shouting into the communications grid.

"Spock . . . Spock . . . acknowledge! We read you, Mr. Spock, come in!" Dead sound hummed back through the grid. She stepped back, her mind whirling. "Nothing. No, not quite nothing." She activated another switch and spoke again.

"Security Officer Davidson."

"Davidson speaking," came the prompt reply.

"Uhura here, Davidson. I want four of your best women in the transporter room double-quick. Use the ones already there if you think they can handle it. Fully armed. Laser cannon, if they can manage it."

"Yes m'am!" Davidson responded enthusiastically.

Uhura left a bemused Scott—he was humming and bawling something in Welsh now—and headed for the elevator. Chapel went with her, aiming for a different level.

Moments later she reached the transporter room. Subengineer Lewis—Chief Transporter Engineer Kyle being as incapacitated as any other man on board—was in charge.

Chapel arrived shortly thereafter equipped with full medikit and tricorder. The four security girls were equipped with somewhat less benign instruments. No cannon, but Uhura didn't complain. The four were loaded with enough hardware to make themselves sufficiently impolite.

"Transport stations, people. Let's go." She was the first one into the alcove.

Subengineer Lewis outdid herself. They materialized inside the temple, at the far end of the audience chamber. There was barely time to orient themselves. Theela and the other women were waiting at the other end.

The sumptuous settings of the temple interior and occasional strange alien artifacts didn't bother them. They'd all (especially Uhura) been on far more alien worlds, in far more upsetting surroundings. Starfleet security personnel

were trained to fight by battling their way through robotic recreations of their own worst nightmares.

What did surprise them was the size of Theela and the others. Women they'd expected, but not giants. Uhura's right hand strayed toward her hip. One burst from the heavy duty phaser strapped there would cut the biggest of them down to size.

The giantesses were gathered around a large transparent cube set into one wall. Apparently the *Enterprise* security team had arrived just in time to upset some sort of ceremony connected with the cube. Certainly the giant women must have been surprised at the sudden appearance of the landing party, but they covered themselves well.

"Greetings," said the largest of them finally, stepping forward. "I am Theela, head female of this compound."

If this gesture was supposed to be conciliatory, it failed. Nor was it intimidating. Uhura took a step toward the bigger woman.

"Lieutenant Uhura of the starship *Enterprise*, head female of this bunch of party crashers. We're here to locate Captain James Kirk and three other fellow crewmen. I have reason to believe they've been treated with something less than total hospitality by you and your friends."

Theela seemed ready with an answer, but seemed to decide that Uhura wasn't about to be bluffed or stalled. "Return to your ship," she said coldly. "You are not wanted here."

"Not until we find Captain Kirk and our friends." Theela motioned to the other women and they started advancing on the little knot of terran females.

"Phasers on stun!" Uhura shouted. "Fire!"

To their credit, none of the women halted their charge. Their courage didn't do them any good. One by one, the stopped-down phaser beams hit them and they dropped to the floor. One got close enough to grab Chapel in a not-so-delicate hand and lift her off the floor before a guard's phaser brought the huge attacker down. Chapel was more stunned than hurt.

They left the giantesses like that, their nervous systems temporarily short-circuited. Uhura moved toward Theela,

prodded her firmly in the side with a foot. She kicked a little harder.

Satisfied that the other wasn't faking, and a little upset at herself for the pleasure she was deriving from booting the unconscious woman, she stepped back. Big they might be, but they possessed no supernormal resistive powers.

She gave orders to the waiting group. "Search this place—parties of two. Christine, you come with me." The security teams immediately split up, taking three corridors at a time.

In a tiny side chamber, Spock lay in darkness on a thin bench of unresilient stone. His hidden face was drawn, the lines in it deeper now. But his eyes were open and his breath was constant, if unsteady.

Voices, were those voices? It took a tremendous effort just to raise his head from the stone. Then . . .

"No sign of them anywhere. Keep looking."

That was definitely Uhura! And Nurse Chapel was there, too.

He tried to yell, failed. His body had grown too weak. That left him with one last possibility. Lifting his head higher, his eyes narrowed with effort as he stared toward the door.

Uhura and Chapel found themselves moving down a high, featureless corridor when Chapel suddenly paused. She looked like someone had just hit her with a sockful of wet sand. There was a voice, Spock's voice! But it was in her mind.

". . . nurse chapel . . . nurse . . . chapel . . .?"

"What is it, Christine?" asked Uhura. Chapel looked bewildered.

"I thought . . . I heard Spock's voice. But I guess—"

". . . CHRISTINE . . ."

There was no mistaking that mental shout! She found her eyes turning frantically to a seemingly blank section of wall. "It is Spock! But how? Of course, Vulcan mind projection. It has to be!"

She moved to stand close to a section of the wall. A quick inspection revealed no hint of latch, knob, dial, or even a

seam. She started running her fingers carefully along the dark metal.

"There must be a hidden catch here, somewhere . . . there must be!" Uhura joined her in the hunt. Rapidly the two women went over the smooth surface. No, not completely smooth . . .

It was Chapel who found the slight depression just above her head and pressed inward with her thumb. There was a slight click and a tall, narrow panel pivoted on its axis. They entered a dark room of indeterminate size. The only light came from the hallway they'd just left.

But there was enough illumination to show them the long table. Spock lifted his head once again and tried to speak. As he did so, the light from the corridor struck his face.

Chapel swayed. "Mr. Spock . . .!" Uhura wanted to scream, but that would have been out of character for an acting commander. Still, the calculated suppositions of the medical computer hadn't prepared her for anything like this.

All she could do was ask inanely, "What happened?" Spock strained to reply but couldn't. He'd been thoroughly drained. He leaned back and closed his eyes, passing slowly from consciousness. Involuntary Vulcan nerves had had enough. This body needed rest. The effort required to generate the successful mind contact with Chapel had exhausted him.

Uhura and Chapel could only exchange expressions of horror.

The urn stood silent in the darkening garden, unnoticed, uninspected. A strong breeze was now nudging branches and flowers with ungentle force. It seemed to lull for a minute, then return suddenly as real wind, a lashing, tearing gale which bent all but the thickest trees.

Sculptured lightning etched copper trails in the gray sky, while alien thunder rolled and echoed back from distant unseen hills. Rain began to fall, slowly at first, fat drops spotting the ground in hesitant, exploring patterns.

Seconds later the storm turned into a raging downpour that would have shamed any tropical rainforest on Earth. Now the reason for the slight downward slant of the garden and

temple grounds became obvious. Streams, rivers of runoff vanished down camouflaged, neatly screened holes and into a complex drainage system.

The wind leveled off and blew steadily from the north, but the rain increased, became a torrent, a cataract, falling in solid waves from the clouds. It was a typical Taurean storm, but it would have appalled any terran weatherman.

Kirk, McCoy, and Carver had been lying weakly in the bottom of the urn. Now they found themselves forced to stand as the downpour drenched them unmercifully. The slick sides of the urn provided capricious support.

Each drop seemed to raise the water level in the urn by millimeters. It rose with shocking, alarming speed. And the storm showed no signs of abating.

"We've got to get out of this," Kirk mumbled. The sound of his aged voice barely rose over the splash of accumulating water. Slowly, painfully. Carver struggled to lift Kirk toward the lid of the urn. But their faded strength proved unequal to the task. And the slippery convex walls were unclimbable. They tried again and again. Again and again Kirk slipped back.

There was nothing but to keep trying, to no avail. Ordinarily, their situation wouldn't have been so desperate. Even if they couldn't reach the top all they had to do was tread water until the rising level carried them up. But in their severely weakened condition, such a constant effort might be beyond them.

Even if they did somehow manage to stay afloat all that time in the cramped quarters, it was doubtful any of them would have the strength to slide aside the heavy metal grid covering the top. They might hold onto the grid, press their faces partway through to keep breathing . . . but eventually their grip would weaken, slip, and one by one they'd sink quietly beneath the surface.

Chapel transported back to the ship with Spock and immediately moved the first officer down to Sick Bay. Chapel hoped that just getting him off the planet might help. Initial sensor readings seemed to confirm her hopes, in part. His

strength was coming back, but it was still the strength of an old man. His eyes remained closed.

Chapel had been fooling with the headband encircling the first officer's forehead for what seemed like hours. Eventually she'd given up hope of finding a catch. Praying there was nothing automatic in it that would explode on release, she went to work with a surgical laser.

The carefully controlled light removed it neatly. Setting the metal circlet aside she prepared a premeasured injection. The aged body didn't reject the strong medication. She'd been very careful gauging the amount of stimulant. No one on the ship was used to programming dosages for an old person.

Removing the spray hypo from Spock's arm, she set it aside and sat back to watch him. After a few minutes the eyelids fluttered, opened.

"Mr. Spock . . .?" His head turned. He'd grown no younger, no more supple, but at least he could talk now.

"Instruct female engineer," he coughed, waited till the fit had passed and began again, more confidently. "Instruct female engineer to divert ship's energy to block probe. Use electromagnetic deflectors. Computer will calibrate probe frequency . . . block . . ."

Chapel shook her head slowly. "We tried that, Mr. Spock. It didn't work."

Spock shook his head violently, found the effort nearly blacked him out.

"Don't use normal deflector energies." His voice was growing stronger as the drug raced through his system. "Divert all ship's power into shield. Everything but minimum life-support." His eyes closed but he forced them back open and extended a shaky, withered hand.

"Hurry, Christine." She nodded obediently and turned toward the intercom.

"Get me engineer Sco—" She stopped in midphrase. Chief Engineer Scott was in no condition to program a coffee pot, much less handle complete realignment of the *Enterprise*'s generators. "Get me Subengineer Hondo McDuff."

She nodded with satisfaction. McDuff would handle the complete readjustment of forces with ease—if in her

eagerness to satisfy everyone she didn't blow up the ship first.

The women regained consciousness slowly. There was no moaning, no groans at the tingling aftereffects of the phasers.

Theela, the strongest of the group, was already on her feet. Her initial antagonism had gone. She showed no desire to challenge even a tickling phaser effect again.

Instead, she retreated against the central dais and watched Uhura.

The object of her attention waited until enough of the other giantesses had recovered to make the demonstration worthwhile. She reset her phaser while searching around the room, settled on a good-sized, cube-shaped table, and fired.

The blinding phaser beam struck it with impressive force and the solid construct of stone and metal fused into a tiny lump of glowing slag. There was a concerted gasp of horror from Theela and the other women. Uhura's voice had taken on a new intensity, too.

"Release Captain Kirk, Dr. McCoy, and Ensign Carver immediately, or we'll melt your temple down into a pink puddle!" She raised the phaser slightly. "But first, maybe well start on you—piece by piece."

Theela didn't reply . . . just stood and looked defiant. Trying to exhibit a casualness she didn't feel, Uhura shrugged and raised her phaser the rest of the way, pointing it at a nearby, beautifully worked stone column. Theela wavered, and a restraining hand gestured hurriedly.

"Wait! No more destruction. I do not know where your people are—" Uhura's finger tightened on the trigger, and Theela's tone grew frantic.

"It's true! They escaped, but wait and I shall find them for you. I was about to do so when you appeared."

She left the dais and once again approached the transparent shape of the *Oyya*. The note was hummed and the machine activated.

"I will find your men for you. But first learn of us and the reasons for our actions."

"I could care le—" Uhura began, but Theela was already speaking to the cube.

"The past—reveal it."

Uhura tried to appear unimpressed as a lifelike miniature of a handsome man appeared in the cube. The detail was unbelievable. The man's hair was short, green, and done up in ringlets. Standing beside him a second later was an equally attractive woman, also with hair of green.

"This is the race from whom we are descended," Theela informed Uhura. "They came to this world which you call Taurus when their home world began to die." She gestured around at the silent hall.

"They built this temple and all surrounding it—the automatic food machinery, the gardens, the underground recycling systems . . . everything." The image in the cube blurred, then slowly cleared again to reveal the man standing alone.

He was changed, shrunken now, old and white-haired and hunchbacked. Theela's voice was sad. "They did not know that radiations on this world drain the life-energy from a body.

"But the women developed a glandular secretion which partly enabled them to withstand these debilitating effects. It also gave them the ability to manipulate, through special devices and a certain local mineral, the now weakened males —to draw life-energy from them to replace what the radiations stole.

"So in learning how to resist this planet's life-hunger, they acquired that same need. In drawing on the life-force of the men, they caused them to age and die. We are the daughters of those first women. They built the Lura-mag, which draws new men to us, the *Oyya*, and they designed the focusing headbands."

As Theela continued with her tragic history, rain continued to fall. Most particularly it continued to fall into a certain large lump of pottery, in which Kirk and the others splashed weakly, half floating now, their toes bouncing off the bottom. Uhura, as she listened to Theela, had no way of knowing how close Kirk, McCoy, and Carver were to drowning.

"To maintain our long life," Theela was saying, "we must revive ourselves this way every twenty-seven years of your time."

Darah broke in unhappily, "We are eternal prisoners of this need, which we did not ask for. We age very slowly. Our damning immortality has also cost us the ability to bear children. The necessary organs are still there, but they do not function. A by-product of our increased life."

Uhura didn't have to ask how they knew this.

"Why don't you just live out your normal life spans?" asked one of the security guards.

"We have no weapons here, no way to destroy the Lura-mag. And when the men eventually arrive," she hesitated, "we are afraid. We have no wish to be murdered as monsters. We have always feared this would happen were we to confess what we have done."

"So we follow the plan, and the cycle continues."

Uhura muttered to herself. These poor creatures had never known any civilization but their own pitifully confined fragment of history. They'd never known any other way to react, never thought to take the chance of asking for help.

Sympathy later, she reminded herself. They were wasting time—time which might be precious to an aged Kirk, McCoy, and Carver. How precious, she didn't yet know.

"That's all very interesting," she replied honestly. "Now, what about Captain Kirk and his companions? If your fancy crystal ball can locate them, why haven't you done it already?"

"We were about to," Theela reminded, "but you came." She turned to face the cube.

"The men of the *Enterprise* who remain on our world . . . reveal them."

An image began to form, screened by plants and vines.

"The garden outside the temple," Theela informed them. The image blurred again, solidified. Then it was as if they were peering at some impossible kind of moving cutaway drawing.

They were looking inside the urn. Kirk, McCoy, and Carver were bobbing inside, pawing at the water which washed over

and around them. Kirk and Carver had unsteady grips on the grid covering the urn. Kirk had a grip on McCoy. and his fingers slipped. McCoy slid below the surface as the captain made frantic flailing motions at the water, struggling to reach him.

"They're drowning!" Uhura exclaimed. She turned to face Theela and her hand tightened on the trigger of the phaser. "Where are they? Take us there now, or—"

"The ceremonial urn in the far glade!" the giantess shouted.

Driving, unrelenting rain soaked everything, obscuring their sight for all but a few meters in any direction. The light was dim, except when an occasional streak of lightning shouldered its way between the clouds and threw trees and thick creepers into sharp relief.

Uhura and the security party followed Theela through the nightmarish storm, phasers drawn. Uhura kept hers focused squarely on the center of the giantess's back and stayed close on the big woman's heels.

Back in the temple she'd seemed docile enough, but Uhura was taking no chances on her disappearing suddenly in the darkness. Let her try something—

Without any warning from Theela they burst into the open glade. The urn looked innocuous enough, standing firmly in the high wind. No sign that there were three men floating inside, their lives ebbing away with each passing minute.

"Phasers on third setting!" Uhura yelled over the drumming rain. "Aim for the base!" She was firing her own weapon as soon as she'd given the order.

The concerted low-powered energy from the five phasers struck the base of the ceramic container. Four broad cracks appeared instantly. Water gushed out of the urn as if from four spigots. The sudden release of internal pressure was too much. Cracks multiplied, and the urn split apart.

Kirk, McCoy, and Carver were washed out like wet logs, tumbling and falling over pieces of broken pottery down the slanted muddy ground. Uhura and the other women from the *Enterprise* had shut off their phasers and were rushing toward them even before the flow of water had subsided.

Uhura's face twisted in pain when she saw Kirk. He'd aged even more than Mr. Spock. And McCoy—

"My God—" she muttered, flipping her communicator open. "Uhura to *Enterprise*. Subengineer Lewis, transporter room." The voice of the technician acting for Chief Kyle shot down through the gray clouds.

"Lewis here, Lieutenant."

"Four to beam up, Lewis—and gently, Lewis, gently. We've got some . . . sick people down here."

"Yes, Lieutenant, I've seen Mr. Spock."

Uhura flipped the communicator closed. "Ensign Tadaki, you're in charge. I'm going up with the captain and Dr. McCoy. Vierne, you'll come with me. I'll send you back down for Carver."

"Excuse me, m'am," interrupted Tadaki, "but what about her—and the others?" She gestured at the silently watching Theela.

"If they don't give you any trouble, leave them alone. But if they go near anything more modern than a spoon, or get belligerent—shoot them."

The medtables were waiting in the transporter room. Nurse Chapel was somewhat prepared for the experience of seeing Kirk and McCoy, but her assistants were not. Nor was Scott, who was assisting Lewis in the transporting.

"Mr. Spock's screen is working," he said in answer to Uhura's unvoiced question. "The rest of the men are recovered, except for some splittin' headaches. Most of us would rather not discuss the whole matter, Lieutenant Uhura."

"Don't blame yourself, Mr. Scott," she replied. "You were acting under an irresistible outside compulsion."

"I still feel a bit of an idiot," the chief engineer grumbled.

"Far be it for me to deny you the pleasure of feeling like one," Uhura admitted. Scott grinned.

Chapel was admonishing her stunned assistants.

"You've seen old men before," she said with an assurance she didn't feel, "get moving."

Drugs and injections restored some strength to the four aged men, but they remained as old as before. Chapel ran

test after test on them, took reading after reading. It was a toss-up as to which result was less depressing than the others.

"No results, Captain," she finally had to admit. "The aging process seems to be the real thing, speeded up. I see no way to reverse it. I've . . . I've tried everything I can think of. Perhaps Dr. McCoy—?" Her tone was hopeful.

McCoy's wasn't. "I can't imagine anything you haven't already tried, Chapel." Dismayed silence filled the examination room.

"I'm not ready for retirement," Kirk mumbled. No one laughed.

Spock, who'd lain deep in thought ever since the first injections had refreshed his mind, broke in.

"Perhaps the transporter is the key."

"Key to what?" snapped McCoy testily.

"Our restoration. The transporter computer automatically records the molecular structure of everyone and everything it handles. Humanoid patterns are permanently recorded and shifted to a special section of the library. It's part of the ship's security systems.

"Think, gentlemen, the records of our original forms were re-recorded when we beamed down to the planet." Kirk's face showed hope.

"You think, Spock, that if we are transported back to the surface and then immediately brought back under the patterns recorded previously, our former bodies would be restored?"

"Possibly, Captain. It has never been tried before. Theoretically, a man could be retransported back into his child's body, if the pattern were available. The danger—mental as well as physical—has precluded experimentation in this area. There would not be a second chance."

"I'm not crazy about our chances right now," Kirk replied. "If you think there's any chance at all, Spock—"

"There is a chance, Captain."

Kirk leaned back on the table and spoke to Uhura. "Inform Engineer Scott of our plans and tell him we'll be back in

transporting as fast as," he grinned, "our wheels will carry us."

"I don't think much of this idea, sir," Scott said when the details had been explained to him.

"Look at me, Mr. Scott," Kirk ordered. "Every other attempt to restore our original bodies has failed. This may be our only chance. You're absolved of all responsibility for it. It's my decision—mine and Mr. Spock's and Carver's and Bones's. We've *got* to try it!"

"All right, sir, I'll do my best."

"You'll have to, Scotty."

With the aid of Chapel's assistants the four men were helped into the transporter alcove. McCoy was unable to stand and had to sit on the transporter disk.

"Go ahead, Mr. Scott."

Scott resisted the urge to draw a deep breath, drew the levers down. The men glittered, faded and were gone.

There was a beep from the transporter console less than a minute later.

"We are on the surface, Mr. Scott," came Spock's voice. "Reprogram the computer as indicated according to the previously recorded patterns."

Scott delicately shifted four new settings into the transporter control. The settings were crucial and required matching the new patterns to the old with no room, absolutely no room, for error. He checked it once, could have checked it a dozen times more without being completely satisfied.

"All right, Mr. Spock. Here goes." He began adjusting the proper dials and switches, his eyes glued to one small unassuming gauge set in the console under his right arm.

"I heard them say this has never been done before, Mr. Scott," Chapel whispered. "What happens if it doesn't work, if things don't match up right?"

"If they're a little bit off, lass, just the tiniest bit—then the atomic structure of Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy, and Carver will break up, disperse—scatter to every corner of the universe. And not all the king's horses nor all the king's men will ever put the captain together again."

There was an end to talking as Scott, using more care than he ever had in a transport operation, slowly brought the necessary levers upward. The familiar hum of pattern integration increased. Transporter Chief Kyle had arrived and now stood to Scott's left, double-checking readouts.

"So far so good, Chief."

Four outlines began to shimmer into view, coalesce.

"Easy, easy . . ." Scott murmured to himself.

The outlines steadied, started to take on color—and suddenly began to oscillate violently.

"Scott, we're losing them!" yelled Uhura helplessly.

Scott didn't reply, his hands working faster on the controls. The four outlines seemed to separate into sixteen tiny sections, flutter still more wildly, and then reform into four shapes again.

The oscillation slowed, stopped. Now the humming steadied, and the four outlines began to fill in once more.

"Coming up on zero mark," noted Kyle, only a slight tremor in his voice hinting at tenseness. "Two . . . one . . . mark!" Scott slammed four levers down so hard it appeared sure he'd shove them right through the console and into the floor.

Kirk blinked and looked around. Uhura smiled in relief.

"You're more handsome than ever, all of you." They were themselves again.

Well, not quite.

"That's very nice of you, Lieutenant," McCoy replied, "but why is everyone staring at us?"

"Yes, Scotty, aren't you going to beam us down? It's time we figured out what that probe—" He looked around and a puzzled expression came over his face. "Say, that's odd, Mr. Spock, have you noticed? The music has stopped."

"Indeed it has, Captain. Most peculiar."

Uhura felt like the girl who'd just stepped through the looking glass. "What's going on here? Aren't you glad to be back in your own bodies again?"

Kirk looked at her strangely. "Back? I don't remember having left mine anyplace, do you, Bones?" McCoy shrugged, looked innocent.

"I think I know what's happened," mused a thoughtful Scott.

"Well, I wish you'd tell me," pleaded a badly confused Uhura.

Scott turned to her. "It's simple, lass. The captain, Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy, and Mr. Carver are once again as they were before they first beamed down to the planet. That not only includes their youthful looks, it includes their original brain patterns, which include memories. They've lost some time—and experiences."

"What's all this, Mr. Scott?" queried Kirk, stepping off the platform. "Why the delay?"

"It's kind of complicated, Captain," began Scott. "We have some tapes from Spock's tricorder, plus those from Dr. McCoy's and Ensign Tadaki's, which ought to clear things up . . ."

It took only a few hours for the four repatterned officers to relive the experiences of the past day. It was difficult to get used to, but the tapes didn't lie.

McCoy didn't stay for all of them. He had a number of questions of his own to put to the medical computer.

Eventually he handed Kirk the results of his work.

"Aren't you going to handle it, Captain?" asked Uhura.

"No, Lieutenant. Besides, I think it might mean more coming from you. I don't have any particular desire to go back down to this particular world. Not if what happened to me on those tapes really happened. It was like watching yourself acting out a bad dream."

Uhura nodded sympathetically. "I understand, Captain." She turned and headed for the transporter room.

Theela, Darah, and the other giantesses were overjoyed when Uhura announced the results of Dr. McCoy's research. Not that they were in any position to reject the offer, she thought sardonically, but she had to admit that they accepted it with what seemed like honest relief.

Theela led her to a large concealed room behind the temple dais. It was dominated by a seated console and an incredibly

complex arrangement of cables, glowing globes, and objects of unknown purpose. The entire apparatus pulsed with internal radiance and hinted of concealed power.

"The Lura-mag," explained Theela solemnly. "Our blessing and our curse." Uhura drew her phaser and set it on high. But before she could begin the work a huge palm came down gently on her forearm. She glanced up at Theela.

"No, let me. It is my place."

Uhura hesitated, but the look in the giantess's eye seemed real, even anxious. She handed over the phaser.

Theela could only fit a fingernail over the trigger, but she managed the tiny weapon well enough. In a few moments the Lura-mag had been reduced to a quietly hissing mound of molten plastic and metal. Theela turned and quietly handed the phaser back to the watching Uhura.

"Tell Captain Kirk we have kept our part of the agreement."

Uhura nodded approvingly. In spite of herself, she was beginning to feel sorry for these poor, bloated creatures.

"There are major medical facilities on Kinshasa. We'll take you there." She noticed that the other women had appeared in the doorway and were watching expectantly.

"How soon will we become as other humanoid women?" asked Theela.

"Dr. McCoy says it should only take a few months. The same modified estrogen that increases your life-spans abnormally is also responsible for your exceptional size, it seems. Certain operations are possible . . . bone reduction, for example, to partially correct this. You'll still be unusually tall, but the differences will be more manageable."

"A new life—a normal life—perhaps love." She smiled down at Uhura, who didn't know whether to cry or throw up. "There are many different kinds of immortality."

That expression, at least, Uhura could empathize with.

As expected, McCoy's declaration that the Taurean women would be able to lead a normal life was somewhat optimistic. The arrival of the dozen spectacular beauties on Kinshasa created something of a sensation. Their reception at the

Federation Fleet Hospital was rather different from that normally reserved for sick aliens.

The doctors professed they were only interested in studying the endocrine irregularity that seemed to prolong life—but Kirk suspected that more than scientific curiosity motivated the male portion of the staff.

In any case, it looked like the Taureans were going to have few troubles gaining acceptance in the Federation. They might be regarded as a challenge, it seemed, but not a threat.

MORE TRIBBLES,
MORE TROUBLES

(Adapted from a script by David Gerrold)

I

The call came in a few days later.

"Message from Starbase Twenty-three, Captain," Uhura announced. "Indication is priority signal, but not confidential."

"Put it on the main screen then, Lieutenant."

"Very good, sir."

Dim with distance, a face appeared ahead - a portrait of a young and rather harassed-looking communications officer. "Captain Kirk, my name is Massey. I'm with Emergency Interstellar Relief ... Communications Section."

"So I see," Kirk replied.

From what Kirk had seen, members of the IRS wore expressions akin to this Massey's nearly constantly. The nature of their work, naturally. The young officer's gaze, however, seemed especially mournful.

"We've been trying to contact you for ages, Captain. Uh ... how did your mission into the Delta Triangle go?"

Word certainly gets around in Starfleet, Kirk reflected.

"Standard exploration," he replied blandly, ignored a muffled choking sound from the region of the helm. "In this case, if it had taken us a day longer, you would have spent those ages trying to contact us."

The Sub-lieutenant looked uncertain, aware that Kirk was trying to tell him something and thoroughly unsure how to interpret it. A hand wiped wavy brown hair from his forehead.

"Glad to hear that, sir," he mumbled in response. "You're familiar with the operations of the Relief Service?"

This one was even younger than he looked, Kirk mused. Had he ever been that young? "I have some familiarity with the functions of Starfleet peripheral organizations," he deadpanned. "What can we do for you?"

Missing the sarcasm completely, the Sub-lieutenant turned crisply businesslike. "Do you know the location of Sherman's Planet?"

Kirk glanced over a shoulder. "Mr. Spock, could you ... ah, never mind. I remember." He looked back to the screen. "A newly settled world on the periphery of the Federation. Population is mixed human and Edoan." Arex nodded in confirmation. There were few worlds where the Edoans felt comfortable outside of their home system. Sherman's planet was one of them.

"I have a cousin in that colony, Captain."

That lent whatever difficulty Massey was about to delineate a touch of immediacy, as far as Kirk was concerned.

"I recall that Sherman's Planet is a fairly successful venture. Not a paradise world, maybe, but certainly a tame one."

"Quite true, Captain." The youngster was nodding vigorously. "It gave every promise of being a rich agricultural world, capable of exporting a wide variety of staples to the rest of the Federation. Records indicate that the initial seedings of the colonists would produce a first crop beyond anyone's expectations." His expression became more doleful.

"Unfortunately, it seems that the first survey team overlooked something. Occasionally, new worlds have surprises locked inside them that are not revealed at once. Sherman's Planet looks to be one of them.

"We're still not sure what the basic cause of the trouble is. A shifting deficiency in the soil, maybe the presence of a cyclic virus in the atmosphere. Whatever it is, it's deadly where

mature grains are involved. As I say, we don't know yet. But the initial crop seems to be a complete failure.

"The soil chemists think they can solve the problem, develop a defense against it. But that will take a minimum of six standard months. The farmers on Sherman don't have six months. It's not a question of export now - it's a question of survival.

"What they do have is a double growing season, thanks to the planet's lushness and long summer. We've turned up a hybrid seed grain on the plains world of Kansastan. According to tests, it ought to be impervious to what's been hitting the Shermanites' crops.

"Two large cargo drones loaded with the hybrid seed are in parking orbit around KS. You are to proceed there, pick up the drones, and escort them to Sherman's Planet. At standard cruising speed you should get them there in plenty of time for the colonists to get the seed into the ground.

"If they don't get the seed, they'll face the coming winter without any crop at all. This is supposedly an established colony. They have only minor emergency supplies left. No crop and they'll face widespread famine. Predictions run as high as ten to eighteen percent fatalities. And the colony proper might never recover."

"The grain will get there. Don't worry, Massey. As you say, we've plenty of time." The best catastrophes, he reflected, were the ones that could be prevented.

"*Enterprise* out, Lieutenant Massey."

The Sub-lieutenant managed a weak grin - as much of a smile as the people in his business could mount - and signed off. Probably to turn his attention to some new disaster, Kirk mused. It took a special kind of person to stand up under the kind of anguished reports the IRS had to handle daily. Kirk did not envy the young man his job.

"Mr. Arex, Mr. Sulu ... set a course for Kansastan."

"Aye, Captain," sounded the simultaneous acknowledgment.

They had no difficulty in securing the drone grain ships. Each was somewhat smaller than the *Enterprise*, but nearly as powerful. High-speed, bulk carriers, their sole purpose was to convey enormous loads across the plenum in the shortest possible time.

The monitoring officer on the small space station orbiting Kansastan was garrulous to the point of boredom, so Kirk was glad when linkup was completed, giving him a chance to depart.

Still, he couldn't help feeling sorry for the fellow. He was assigned to a world whose people went about their Federation business efficiently and with little fanfare. They didn't get many visitors.

And that monitor might serve in that isolated post until his retirement without a single promotion.

The journey to Sherman's Planet was passing uneventfully. So uneventfully that when they were three-quarters of the way to the outpost colony, Kirk was considering beaming the nearest Starfleet base for further orders.

Instead, he sighed, activated the recorder in the arm of the command chair.

"Captain's Log, stardate 5526.2. Having been assigned to escort two robot grain ships to Sherman's Planet, the *Enterprise* is now approximately..." He looked to Arex. The navigator nodded, turned to his readouts and recited a figure. Kirk repeated it into the recorder.

"...from the colony. Upon completion of delivery of the quinto-triticale seed, the *Enterprise* will proceed to..."

"Captain? Captain." Sulu's tone was anxious.

Mildly irritated, Kirk put the Log on hold. "What is it, Mr. Sulu? You know better to interrupt when I'm making an official..."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I've just picked up some kind of smaller vessel. A one-man scout or an independent trader ... can't be sure at this distance. It's running an evasive course, sir, at top speed - with a Klingon battle cruiser in close pursuit."

Kirk thought rapidly, lifted his finger from the hold button. "Changing course to investigate the pursuit of a small ship of unknown origin by a Klingon ship of the line. Out." He looked to the front.

"Mr. Arex, alter course to put us on an intercept route with the smaller craft."

"Changing course, Captain," the navigator answered promptly.

Kirk drummed fingers on a chair arm, studied the screen impatiently. "Any confirmation of identity on either ship, Mr. Sulu?"

"Not yet, Captain." Sulu was bent over a gooseneck viewer.

"Captain?" Kirk looked around.

"Yes, Mr. Spock?"

The first officer looked over from the library computer console. "Among the information received by high-beam code transmission from Starfleet Science Center in the past several days was an item that it has not been necessary to mention until now. There are rumors from Federation agents that the Klingons have a new weapon, abilities unknown.

"Your timing is remarkable, as always, Mr. Spock," Kirk commented, straight faced. "The *Klothos* didn't have it."

"No, Captain. Had she, it seems certain Commander Kor would have employed it."

"Cruiser is closing rapidly on its target," Sulu announced, forestalling any further discussion of new Klingon potential. Spock turned to his sensor readouts.

"Initial scan indicates the smaller vessel is a one-man scout ship of common design. Federation manufacture and registry probable but not yet certain."

"I think I can get the other ship on a high-resolution scope, Captain," Sulu offered. He worked at his instrument board.

A second later the new picture appeared on the screen, showing the small scout with unusual sharpness, considering the range. A sudden burst of light flashed across the screen, disappeared, as if something had arced for a microsecond between the *Enterprise* and the fleeing scout.

Kirk already guessed the explanation. "Mr. Sulu, shift pickup, please."

Sulu figured it out only seconds later. His tone was one of puzzled amazement. "They're firing on him, Captain."

He adjusted another switch. A different scanner took over from the first. The new view showed the little craft's massive pursuer, clearly recognizable as a Klingon battle cruiser. As they watched, multiple ripples of light flared from the warship's prow as she let go with her secondary disruptor batteries.

Again Sulu changed views. This time the scout ship eclipsed the disruptor bolts and they passed on its far side. Kirk doubted the Klingon gunners would miss again. The scout vanished from the screen and from then on some instrumental calisthenics were required of Sulu to keep it on the screen.

The pilot was going all out to avoid being hit, Kirk noted. He was good, and his ship was mobile; but it couldn't dodge a warship's electronic predictors forever, couldn't continue to escape disruptor fire that could obliterate much larger prey.

A bigger question was the sanity of the Klingon's commander. His ship was so far within Federation space there was no possibility of navigational error. Unless he and his executive officers had gone completely mad, they knew exactly what they were doing and what chasing the scout ship this far

implied. To risk such a blatant violation of Federation borders was a sign that someone desired to destroy that tiny ship very much, indeed.

Territorial intrusion took clear precedence over escort duty. "Ahead, warp-six."

Sulu and Arex coaxed response from the ship's engines. Kirk activated his chair intercom.

"Transporter room, report." A crackle of opening channels, and then a familiar burr. "Transporter room ... Scott speakin'."

"Scotty?" Kirk's brow furrowed in mild surprise. "What are you doing there? Where's Chief Kyle?"

"On his second off-shift, Captain. I thought I'd take it for him. I've been goin' crazy tryin' to figure out how the Elysians picked you and Dr. McCoy off right through our defensive screens and..."

"Never mind that now, Mr. Scott," Kirk interrupted quickly. "You haven't taken the console apart, I hope?"

"No, sir." Now it was Scott's turn to sound surprised. "I intend to eventually, but right now she's fully operational. Why? What's happenin'?"

"We've run into a Klingon battle cruiser chasing a solo scout and..."

"A Klingon? This deep inside Federation...?"

"I know, Scotty, I know. She's firing on the smaller ship. We're going to try and rescue its pilot."

"Aye, Captain!" There was a pause at the other end, then, "He's nothin' in the way of a screen, sir, but at this distance it'll take some time to scan the pattern of whoever's on board. I dinna want to bring him in in pieces."

"Get to work on it, Mr. Scott. When you lock in on him, don't hesitate. Bring him aboard."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk turned his attention back to the screen. Another set of light waves passed close by the scout. The cruiser was still firing. Someone muttered that the Klingons couldn't shoot worth a damn.

At the tail end of the mutter, a last bolt struck the ship a glancing blow. A tiny white cloud billowed from it as escaping atmosphere froze solid. The scout continued to move, but it was clearly disabled now.

Still no word from Scott. He spoke over his shoulder.

"Open general hailing frequencies, Lieutenant." Kirk waited a moment, giving Uhura time to comply, then spoke into the pickup once more.

"Klingon battle cruiser ... identify yourself. This is Captain James Kirk commanding USS *Enterprise* speaking. You are violating Federation space. Identify yourself ... halt firing on scout ship."

Sulu switched the forward scanner back again from the weaving scout to the cruiser. It did not take long to tell that the Klingons had no intention of altering their course or ceasing their attempts to destroy the fleeing scout. Several more disruptor bolts darted from the prow of the warship.

"Doesn't even bother to acknowledge," Kirk muttered. A certain amount of hesitation on the part of an interloper could be tolerated. Such outright contempt for a major treaty could not.

"Mr. Spock," he ordered, his voice lowering meaningfully, "you will note this violation and enter it officially in computer records. Mr. Sulu, arm all phasers. Deflector shields up. All hands to battle stations."

After Uhura activated the alarm, the *Enterprise* became a hive of instant activity. Dropping whatever they were doing when that klaxon sounded, each moved to his or her position of readiness.

"All stations report battle status, Captain," Uhura reported a few moments later.

"Phasers armed," Sulu announced. "Shields up." Several other switches were snapped over. "Ship is battle status." Kirk nodded, spoke to the mike in one last try.

"Klingon battle cruiser, this is your last chance. Identify yourself." Only the faint static of distant suns sounded back over the speakers. "Ahead, warp-eight ... range, Mr. Sulu?"

"Closing, sir." Again the view foreward altered, back to the scout ship.

"The injured vessel is losing speed rapidly, Captain," informed Spock.

Kirk studied the image worriedly, spoke to the intercom. "Scotty, have you got that pilot yet? We're running out of time up here."

"Workin' on it, Captain," the chief engineer replied distractedly.

Another disruptor bolt flashed past the scout. A second. The third didn't miss. There was a brief flare of radiation from the superheated hull and the tiny vessel melted away like disintegrating butter, faster than a splinter of magnesium in a firestorm.

In the transporter room four lights all commenced blinking at once and several gauges did unnatural things. Lieutenant Commander Scott, after several abortive attempts to alter the reading above one particularly significant dial, launched into an impassioned diatribe concerning the Klingon's ancestry, origins, probable spiritual destination, morals and general lack of good taste. His outburst did nothing to improve the readouts, but it was decidedly therapeutic. Scott's only disappointment was that the Klingons could not listen in.

Actually, if they had been able to, it is doubtful Scott's aspersions could have made them any madder than they were already.

"They got him," Sulu muttered angrily.

"Maybe not." Kirk bent to the intercom. "Scotty? Scout's gone ... disruptor bolt. The pilot?"

Scott's voice came back full of confusion. "I don't know, sir. That blast must have hit his ship at the crucial second. You should see some of these instrument readings, Captain. In college we once did an experiment which involved dropping an egg from a thousand meters up onto a concrete platform. That's kind of what the integration parameters look like now, sir.

"I *think* I got him out in one piece. The trick now's goin' to be puttin' him back that way."

"Scotty, you pro..."

"Captain!" Kirk turned at Sulu's warning shout. His gaze went to the screen. The Klingon cruiser was turning, turning in a wide arc and heading directly toward the *Enterprise*. It began to accelerate.

Spock raised an eyebrow. Kirk's eyes widened.

"They're confident of something," Spock theorized. There was a beep from his own console, and he glanced back to study a computer readout.

"Silhouette and class identification confirmed, Captain. Imperial battle cruiser *Devisor*, Captain Koloth commanding."

The Klingon warship continued to close the distance rapidly. But just before it entered effective phaser range, it sheered off, keeping the distance between them. A strange blue halo formed at the ship's bow, faint at first but growing steadily in size. It thickened until it had the consistency of blue smoke. There was a sharp flash, and the tenuous blob leaped away from the *Devisor* toward the *Enterprise*.

Arex stiffened in his seat as the screen was filled with expanding blue cloud.

"The new weapon, Mr. Spock?" Kirk asked.

"Some kind of solidified field effect, Captain." He was studying sensor readouts. "It will contact us in precisely four seconds." His hands tightened on the console edge. "It appears capable of producing a most remarkab..."

There was a lurch as the *Enterprise* rolled forty-five degrees on her port side. It swung upright again. All on-board lights had gone out momentarily. Now they flickered dimly on, operating on stored power.

"...disruption," Spock concluded.

External hull scanners revealed that the *Enterprise* was now cloaked in the wavy blue field.

Disruption of another kind had affected the main transporter room. Both the instrumentation and Chief Engineer Scott were producing some startling effects.

Sulu was working controls hurriedly. His face wore an expression at least one part panic. "Captain, our engines are dead."

"We have been struck by some kind of projected stasis field," Spock reported evenly. "Our matter-antimatter generators are disabled. So are the impulse engines. We seem to be completely paralyzed. Most remarkable."

"I'm not feeling in an admiring mood," Kirk shot back. "All phasers ... fire."

Sulu attempted to respond. His worried frown knotted tighter. "Phasers don't work either, sir."

"I might note that my admiration does not preclude a desire on my part for retaliation, Captain," Spock explained. "I must observe, however, that the photon torpedoes will probably not respond, either. It appears that this field is capable of neutralizing all high-order field and warp functions."

"We could always throw rocks," Uhura suggested.

"This new Klingon weapon must be one of surprising power if it can so thoroughly immobilize a large starship like the *Enterprise*," Spock continued, speaking to no one in particular. "The energy drain must be enormous. Almost insupportable, I should think." No one was listening closely.

Kirk was at the com again. "Scotty, did you retrieve that pilot yet?"

"He's still in the beam, sir, but I can't integrate him. All transporter systems have been interrupted."

"You sure you've got him, though?"

The chief engineer glanced to the transporter alcove. A familiar shimmering of multicolored particles continued to hover there, outlining a rotund, vaguely humanoid form. And that was all it did, growing neither stronger nor weaker.

"Gauges indicate seventy-three percent solidification attained, Captain. But I need at least another eighteen percent to assure successful final integration. We're going to need more power for that, sir."

"Hang onto him, Scotty." For what? They were at the mercy of the Klingon ship, unable even to run. He hammered the arm of his chair once, twice.

"Captain," Uhura broke in, adjusting her earphone, "message coming in."

"Put it through, Lieutenant."

He forced himself to relax. Even managed a half smile ... which lasted all of two seconds. But at least he was able to keep himself from shouting angrily as the image of the Klingon bridge formed on the screen. Most of it was blocked out by a single figure.

The Klingon commander turned from speaking to someone off-screen to smile ingratiatingly into the pickup. He was fighting natural instincts to achieve a patina of politeness.

"This is Captain Koloth of the battle cruiser *Devisor*. Have I the honor of addressing the renowned Captain James Kirk, who..."

"You're not calling to laud my reputation," Kirk interrupted him firmly. "Release my ship."

"Of course, Captain, of course. Gladly, happily." He positively oozed good fellowship. "There is only one small thing we require. You must turn over to me the pilot of the little ship we were escorting."

"Didn't look like you wanted to escort him very far," Kirk observed. "In any case, I haven't got anybody to give you. Your last bolt dissolved him along with his ship."

Koloth assumed a sad smile. "I beg to differ with you, Captain Kirk, but our sensors distinctly recorded certain powerful energies at work on board the small ship at the moment of disruption. Computer analysis identifies same as a transporter beam of a type well known to be mounted on your class cruiser.

"As there are no other ships of your class in this immediate area save yourself, I must therefore assume the beam came from your ship. This in itself is not an arguable thing, but sensors further indicate a probability of better than half that the pilot of the scout was successfully removed before his vessel unfortunately self-destructed."

"You lie about as well as you navigate, Captain Koloth," Kirk countered. "In any case that ship was of Federation registry, operating well inside Federation boundaries - something you might also take notice of. The pilot is under our protection."

Koloth's face turned the color of a bad apple. He appeared to be trembling slightly. Somehow the captain was maintaining an iron control over his emotions. Something vital was necessary to force such restrictions on him.

It was.

"Captain, this person has committed ecological sabotage against the Imperium. If I have to take him by force I will."

"Temper, temper, Koloth. The first Klingon to step aboard this ship uninvited will be the last Klingon. Mr. Spock, full internal security alert."

For some reason, Kirk's final refusal seemed to calm Koloth. Even to widen his smile. "I'm afraid, Captain Kirk, that you'll find your hand weapons do not operate any better than your major armament."

Uhura had noticed something on her board and leaned over to whisper it to Spock. "Mr. Spock, I'm losing contact with our robot grain ships. They are not held by the stasis field and so they are continuing on course."

"What was that?" Kirk asked, looking over at the science station.

"I repeat, Captain," Koloth continued, "you must turn over to us the..."

"A moment, Captain. This situation calls for consultation with my officers."

Koloth looked disgusted.

"Ah, your archaic democratic principles? You have a few minutes, Captain, no longer. My patience is growing thin. If by that time you have not beamed the pilot over to us we will destroy your ship piecemeal as it sits helpless within our field."

"All right, Koloth, all right. You've made your point. Just give me a few minutes to talk this out." He rose from the chair, turned to Uhura.

"Lieutenant, cut off reception."

"Yes, sir." She complied as Kirk walked over to stare at the readouts above her.

"As you can see, sir," she commented, gesturing at the monitoring gauges, "they're moving off."

"Then they still have power. Can we control the robot ships, Sulu, in our present state?"

"Affirmative, sir," the helmsman replied a moment later. "Our remote guidance system is a low-order field effect and not affected by the Klingon stasis."

"Koloth made no mention of them. There's a chance he's so concerned with us he has forgotten about them. Bring them back, Mr. Sulu - and have them ram the Klingon ship."

"Captain..."

Kirk looked over at his first officer.

"You cannot afford to lose that grain," Spock insisted. "The situation on Sherman's Planet..."

Kirk cut him off. "I can afford even less to lose the *Enterprise*, Mr. Spock. Once he gets what he wants, do you think Koloth will let us go to report this serious violation of Federation territory? Why should he, considering where he's got us?"

Sulu was working furiously at his instruments as Kirk took his seat again. "Open the hailing frequency again, Lieutenant Uhura." The screen cleared quickly. "Captain Koloth? We've reached a decision." He paused a moment for effect and to give the robot ships a few seconds more to gain on the *Devisor*.

"I'm going to give you one last chance to release the *Enterprise*."

Koloth, assumed an expression of incredulity. "*You're* going to give *me* one more chance?" His voice dissolved in Klingon laughter - hacking, unmelodious, unamusing. Apparently someone off-screen said something equally unamusing, because Koloth abruptly was listening hard and looking to his left. He was frowning when he turned back to Kirk.

"It won't work, Captain."

Koloth's face disappeared and the screen went blank. Kirk was not sorry to see him go. He smiled slightly himself. The threat was working, otherwise Koloth would still be there, gloating.

Their counterattack was crude and primitive and would have appalled the men who had designed the *Enterprise*'s offensive weaponry. This didn't change the fact that it was working. Either of the robot ships could make a very thorough mess of the *Devisor*.

Sulu expanded their field of vision. At the same time, two new azure bubbles began to form at the *Devisor*'s bow. They grew rapidly in size. Again the brief flare splitting them off from the mother ship and then they were moving away in opposite directions, toward the onrushing robots.

"Incredible," Spock was murmuring, "utterly incredible ... the amount of energy that must be required to maintain those fields."

Sulu switched to a deeper pickup to follow one of the blue fogs as it headed toward an approaching grain carrier. As they watched, it suddenly seemed to flutter, uncertain as an albatross coming in for a landing. Fluttered, wavered ... thinned ... dissolved.

So did its companion cloud. So did the major field surrounding the *Enterprise*. The starship gave a little shudder as it was released from paralysis.

"I thought so," commented Spock with barely a hint of satisfaction in his voice. "They couldn't maintain it. They didn't have enough power. Even a ship twice the size of the *Devisor*..."

Kirk wasn't really listening. "Keep phasers locked on target, Mr. Sulu. But hold your fire until they fire first. Give them a chance to back off."

"Aye, sir." The helmsman kept his face turned away so his Captain wouldn't see the undiplomatic, predatory gleam in his

eyes.

Flashes of a deeper blue erupted from the *Devisor*'s prow ... her main disruptor batteries this time. The first barrage destroyed the propulsion units of one of the robots, missing the huge cargo module. A second attack missed the other carrier, badly.

"Apparently their battle capacity is way down," Spock observed. "They only damaged one ship. Missing two unscreened drones at this range indicates a definite lack of offensive power - for the moment, at least."

As if in confirmation, the *Devisor* turned away from the *Enterprise* in a sweeping curve, away from the remaining charging drone.

"Veering off," Sulu noted formally, locked to his console.

Spock was bent over his hooded viewer. "Sensors indicate their power cells are almost exhausted. I doubt they possess more than minimal deflector capability. We could destroy them at will."

Kirk nodded. "Yes, and I bet Koloth knew exactly what he was asking of his ship. He took a tremendous gamble, and he lost.

"Right now I'm more curious in finding out just what he felt was worth the loss of his ship and an interstellar incident bordering on an act of war. Something has made them awfully angry. They really wanted that pilot." He relaxed as the *Devisor* passed out of disruptor range and turned to the com.

"Mr. Scott ... can you integrate that pilot now?"

"It will still take a few minutes, Captain," came the tired reply. "He was scattered to hell and gone, but he's locked in solid. I just need a little time to double-check integration."

"We'll be right there, Scotty. Kirk out." He rose from the chair. "Lieutenant Uhura, call Dr. McCoy to the transporter room. In addition to anything incurred in delayed transport, we don't

know what injuries this person may have suffered before we took him off his ship."

"Very well, Captain." She turned to contact Sick Bay.

"Mr. Spock...?"

II

Both men were silent as the elevator took them toward the transporter room. But their thoughts were similar. Each wondered what had made the Empire send a warship so far into Federation territory. True, the Klingons placed a great deal of importance on revenge. But that hardly seemed a sufficient explanation. Though for a moment, Captain Koloth had been as angry as any Klingon officer Kirk had ever seen.

Ecological sabotage, he had said. Well, to a Klingon that might mean any number of offenses which did not really merit destruction. They would find out exactly what was going on in a very few seconds - from the object of the Klingon's wrath.

McCoy was waiting for them as they entered. Kirk's attention was drawn immediately to the transporter alcove. A sharp silhouette there still shimmered with color.

"Haven't got him yet, Mr. Scott?"

"Just finalizing him now, sir. I've been integrating very slowly. No tellin' what a long delay in transport will do. It's almost fail-safe, sir, but there are still histories of peculiar aberrations bein' produced when such delayed folks were rushed back."

Kirk held his impatience and stared into the chamber. The vibrant glow began to fade and a human shape to emerge. Or ... was it? There seemed to be a multiple form. No ... one human, all right. Very stout, round. One human - surrounded by lots of little round stout things, very unhuman. Quite a number of little round stout shapes.

The last of the transporter hue started to fade out and the pilot became recognizable - along with the other beings.

Spock raised an eyebrow uncertainly. "It would appear to be..."

Kirk recognized it ... them, too. Wished fervently - oh, how fervently he did not. His words were measured, reluctant. "I think we know that man."

McCoy broke in.

"I don't want to think about it!" The doctor bestowed an anguished look on the chief engineer. "Scotty, what you said about delays in transport producing aberrations - I didn't think you meant anything quite this hideous."

Scott had also recognized the figure and was undergoing mild shock himself. "Not again!" he finally howled.

"Cyrano Jones." Kirk finally said it out, making the name sound like a curse. And in a sense that pudgy, falsely Falstaffian figure surely was.

Cyrano Jones smiled at them. He beamed. He expanded, fairly radiating good humor, hands relaxed on hips. Faint mewing sounds issued from the region of his ankles.

"And he's got tribbles with him," Scotty groaned.

When the cylindrical transporter effect had ceased, the tribbles Jones had clustered around him immediately spilled across the alcove floor. Kirk and Spock glanced at each other, exchanged telepathic sighs.

Kirk moved to the subsidiary console and punched the switch that would tie him in with the log. He needed a couple of minutes of enforced order before he could begin to deal rationally with this situation. As if anyone could deal rationally with tribbles. However...

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"Captain's Log, supplemental. Our rescue of the pilot of the one-man ship being pursued by the Klingon cruiser *Devisor*

has given us important knowledge of a new Klingon weapon - as yet unperfected.

"It has also inflicted on us - for as short a time as possible - the presence of Cyrano Jones, interstellar trader and general nuisance."

"General trader and interstellar nuisance," Scott corrected grimly.

Nudging tribbles out of his path, Jones made his way toward Kirk. "Ah, Captain Kirk. My old friend, Captain Kirk!" He extended his arms to clasp the captain in a fraternal embrace. Fortunately, Kirk had the transporter console between him and Jones.

Kirk turned to the goggle-eyed ensign who had been assisting Scott at the transporter's backup instrumentation. "Seal off this area, Mister, and I mean tight."

"Aye, sir," the man acknowledged, moving to comply.

Kirk's feet suddenly felt unnaturally warm. He looked down and the reason became apparent. Two large tribbles had sandwiched his right ankle. They were rubbing against him from both sides, cooing and purring.

He took an angry step to the side. Both tribbles fumbled to follow him, distracting his attention from the mewing horde which had quickly spread throughout the room from their landing place in the transporter alcove.

Kirk moved up close to confront their owner. His indignation would have been helped greatly if Jones had possessed a face and disposition more like Koloth's and less like that of a beardless St. Nick. Even so, Kirk managed to work up a good dose of righteous anger.

"You know the law about transporting species proven harmful, Jones."

"Harmful, Captain?" The trader was a fount of innocence. Kirk made an angry gesture to encompass the room.

"Well then, what would you call these?"

"Tribbles, Captain."

That was the last straw ... or hair, in this case. Kirk had just endured the trauma of saving his ship from a previously unknown and nearly fatal weapon to save someone whom he almost wished he had never met in the first place.

"Don't get smart with me, Jones. Believe me, I'm not in the mood."

"Captain, really, I assure you. I wasn't being smart at your expense." Kirk eyed him warningly. "These aren't harmful. These are safe tribbles."

McCoy stood nearby, watching and listening. He had knelt and scooped up a straw-colored, furry ball. It immediately tried to crawl up his arm, rubbing and purring. He used his other hand to pluck it off, shook it threateningly at Jones. The abused tribble purred indignantly.

"As you are well aware, Jones, there is no such thing as a safe tribble."

"A safe tribble," Spock amplified, in his best professional tone, "is a contradiction in terms. I am surprised, Mr. Jones, that you would attempt to fool us with so obvious a lie - particularly us, to whom tribbles are well remembered for their dangerous reproductive proclivities."

"And they breed fast, too," Jones admitted. "Don't you see? Gentlemen, that's why these tribbles are safe." He was pleading with them. "They don't reproduce."

Four stunned faces stared back at him. McCoy was the first to voice the skepticism all felt. "Don't reproduce? Who ever heard of a tribble that didn't..."

"I've had them genetically engineered for compatibility with humanoid ecologies," the trader added quickly. "A simple gene manipulation coupled with some selective breeding. See how friendly and lovable they are?"

Of course they were friendly and lovable. Tribbles were as well known for being friendly and lovable as they were for reproducing at astronomical rates. And this bunch was every bit as affectionate as any Kirk had seen before. They rubbed and purred and mewed and cuddled with boundless enthusiasm. And as he looked around the room, he had to admit he didn't see a hint of tribbles reproducing.

Not that there was anything for them to reproduce on, but he had seen tribbles seemingly multiply out of thin air. There did not appear to be any more now than when they first materialized.

"Not a baby in the bunch," Jones pointed out proudly. "You know what great pets they make, Captain. Profitable, too."

Something had been nagging at the back of Kirk's mind while Jones had been spouting his smooth sales spiel. Now he had it.

"Jones, how did you get away from Space Station K-Seven in the first place. You were supposed to take care of all the tribbles there. Regardless of what genetic engineering you claim to have done on these, the tribbles on K-Seven were definitely not altered for non-reproduction. You couldn't have cleaned them off in such a short time."

Jones was fumbling at his copious pockets. "Quite so, Captain. But I managed a short parole and found myself some help. Ecologically sound, efficient, inoffensive help."

The thing he took from his pocket was red, had numerous arms or legs or both, and looked decidedly unfriendly.

"This, Captain, is a tribble predator. It's called a glommer."

"Interesting, if true," commented Spock, studying the creature and reserving judgment. "Is the name derivative or descriptive?"

"See for yourself," Jones said, winking.

He put the glommer on the floor. Making rumbling sounds like a toy volcano, it hesitated, orienting itself. It froze stiffly, then started creeping toward the nearest tribble. Pausing a short distance from a moderate-sized specimen, it tensed. Kirk thought he could see the thick hairs on the creature's appendages stiffen slightly. Without a sound and with surprising suddenness, it sprang at its prey like a wolf spider. The tribble never had a chance as the glommer landed on it.

It spread its body surface wide, engulfing the tribble completely. There was a harried series of barely audible slurping sounds accompanied by a violent quivering. Then the predator relaxed.

But only for a moment. In addition to being efficient, it was also apparently ravenous. Its metabolism seemed geared to continual consumption. Bottom hairs tensing, it stalked off after another tribble. Not even a hair was left of the first

McCoy was impressed. "Neat, too."

But Kirk, having satisfied himself that Jones apparently was not a fugitive from K-seven, was interested in something much more important than glommer hygiene. Even McCoy looked away from the interesting glommer-versus-tribble drama to listen to Jones' answer.

"Jones, just why *were* the Klingons chasing you?" The trader looked at the walls, the ceiling, his tribbles - anywhere to avoid meeting Kirk's waiting gaze.

"Well," the Captain prompted, "are you going to tell me you don't know?" Given any possible out, Jones leaped at it, nodding vigorously.

"That's it exactly, Captain! I don't. The Klingons have notoriously bad tempers, you know."

"While it must be admitted that the Klingon mental state tends toward the bellicose," Spock observed, "they still retain a sense of proportion when exercising their animosities. I do not see a Klingon cruiser captain entering Federation space to

attack a Federation vessel in a fit of pique. Nor for mere recreation, or because his liver was bothering him."

"You're right about their temper, though," Kirk added. "Captain Koloth seemed oddly upset over something he called ecological sabotage."

Jones' eyes took on a rotundity that matched his belly. "Me? A saboteur? I ask you now, Captain, do *I* look like a saboteur?" He assumed an air of outraged dignity.

"Captain Koloth was pretty emphatic about it," Kirk continued, watching the trader carefully.

"I'm not responsible for Captain Koloth's perverse imagination," Jones insisted.

"If it was imagination." Kirk's tone turned coaxing. "Are you sure, Cyrano, that you didn't...," and he held up a hand with thumb and forefinger squeezing a centimeter of air, "...maybe accidentally perhaps possibly perform some teensy weensy little act that might have caused the Klingons to overreact like this?"

Jones glanced reluctantly at Spock, then at McCoy and saw no relief from that quarter. He looked at the floor.

"Actually, it was such a little thing. I can't understand why they got so upset. You understand, don't you, Captain?"

Kirk's tone indicated there was an outside chance he did not: *"What did you do?"*

Jones tried to look nonchalant, even managed a slight laugh. "Nothing at all, really. I only sold ... them ... some ... uh ... tribbles..."

Kirk's voice dropped dangerously. "You sold tribbles on a Klingon planet?"

"Well," the trader protested lamely, "I didn't *know* it was a Klingon planet."

"What species were the inhabitants," Kirk pressed relentlessly.

"Oh, mixed. You know, a mongrel world. Tellerites, Sironians, a few Romulans - Klingons, too."

"How about *outside* the customs port." This from Spock. Jones pretended not to hear.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Spock?"

"I believe you heard me correctly, Mr. Jones. The population *outside* the free customs and reception station. What did it consist of?"

Jones watched the glommer continue to devour tribbles at an astonishing rate. "Uh ... Klingons ... mostly."

"What was that? Speak up," Kirk ordered.

"Klingons ... they were all Klingons!" Jones exploded. "But where I set down it was a mixed populace, Captain. So how could I tell for certain it was a Klingon planet?"

Kirk had had enough. "Jones," he began, as though he were lecturing a five-year-old, "tribbles don't like Klingons. You know tribbles don't like Klingons. Didn't you think they might object to your selling tribbles to visitors at their landing station?"

"Ah well, Klingons like tribbles even less," Jones confessed, ignoring Kirk's question. "It was lucky you came along and saved me when you did, friend Kirk. I couldn't have outrun them much longer."

"I'd estimate about another two seconds," Kirk theorized, wistfully. Jones nodded in somber agreement.

"You snatched me from the jaws of death at the moment of judgment, Captain. I should have known that in a desperate situation, our life-long friendship, the high regard in which you hold me, your unrelenting desire to see justice done..."

Trying to control his stomach, Kirk switched to less emotionally charged subject matter. "I am sure, Jones, that a quick scan of our files will show that you stand in violation of three Federation mandates and forty-seven local laws plus various attendant paragraphs thereunto appended. I am formally placing you under arrest."

That pronouncement was sufficiently impressive to draw from Jones a stunned gasp. Although anything was preferable to being either obliterated by or turned over to the tender mercies of the Klingons, Jones was not enamored of Federation mind-wipe techniques. Federation criminal psycho-engineers were an especially dull lot. They tended to remove one's most interesting memories.

"You're confined to quarters until we complete our current mission. Then we'll proceed to the nearest Star-fleet base and turn you over to the proper authorities."

Jones was thinking furiously. "Captain, couldn't we talk this over?"

Kirk's reply was a look of such overpowering silent fury that even the trader was cowed.

"I didn't think so," the trader mumbled.

Kirk turned to the ensign at the door. "Mr. Hacker, keep an eye on our visitor. Call security and have them prepare suitable accommodations for him." He nodded in Jones' direction.

The ensign moved to the com to comply.

"Bones, let's take a couple of these so-called altered tribbles down to your lab and check out Jones' claims. If there's any truth to them, it'll be a first."

"All right, Jim." McCoy busied himself gathering up suitable specimens.

They headed for the elevator. Kirk looked back to Jones. "If these turn out to be normal tribbles, Jones, I'm personally going to order you placed in solitary with tribble mewing

played round the clock into your cell at a dozen times normal volume."

"Really, Captain, do you think I would lie to you about something as important, as vital, as incriminating as this?"

"Yes," Kirk replied without hesitation. "Let's go, gentlemen." He paused as the elevator doors opened, had a last thought. "Oh, Mr. Hacker?"

The ensign looked back. "Sir?"

Kirk spoke as he nudged a tribble out of the elevator with his foot. "Don't listen to anything he says. And above all ... don't let him sell you anything."

"Yes, sir."

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At McCoy's request, they all met in the main briefing room an hour later. The doctor had spent much of that time putting the sample tribbles through every test he could thing of. He had also spent much of the time going *hmmmm* a lot.

Tribbles were the most interesting things to study. And these tribbles offered some surprises. He picked up one specimen - an unusually large tribble, Kirk thought - and gestured with it as he spoke.

"I'm afraid Cyrano Jones was right, Jim. These tribbles don't reproduce. They just get fat."

"Are you sure, Bones?"

"Absolutely. Any excess food turns into flesh instead of stimulating reproduction." He put the corpulent tribble on the floor. It immediately crept over to Kirk and crawled up and down one boot, rubbing and purring.

"So I don't think we have anything to worry about."

"Not as far as the tribbles are concerned, anyway," Kirk agreed. "This new Klingon weapon is another matter. Koloth

was adamant about getting his hands on Jones. We may not have seen the last of them." He reached down and pulled the tribble off his boot, tossed it into a far corner - as gently as possible, it seemed to Scott.

"It is an energy-sapping field of great strength, Captain," Spock commented. "It totally immobilizes a ship and its weapons capacity. But it appears that when extended to its ultimate limits, it also immobilizes the attacker as well."

"Aye," agreed Scott. "If that's true then it's a weapon that leaves them as helpless as it leaves us."

"I believe I just said that, Mr. Scott," observed Spock.

There was a pause while everyone present considered this information.

"The practical advantages of such a weapon would seem to be limited," Kirk concluded.

"Limited, perhaps," put in Spock. "But that does not obviate its initial, overwhelming effect." He considered another moment, then went on. "The key question is, how long does it take them to recharge? They'll probably attack us again as soon as they're back up to full power.

"If Captain Koloth has any ability in tactics, he will undoubtedly begin by destroying the remaining robot ships to prevent us from using the same trick again. That would put us in a difficult position, indeed." He looked unusually somber. "They must want Cyrano Jones very badly indeed."

"He really doesn't seem the saboteur type, Jim," McCoy commented.

Kirk stared at the fine grain in the wood table-top and wished his thoughts were as straight. "Yes ... yes. And yet, I get the impression there's something he's not telling us. He is still holding something back." He took a deep breath, looked up. "That will be discovered in due time. Mr. Scott, let's see a status report on the damaged grain ship."

Scott hit the necessary switch, and the triple table-screen popped up in front of them. Further manipulation of controls produced pictures which illustrated his commentary.

"Well, sir, in the past hour we've managed to transfer all the seed grain aboard. And mind, Captain, it wasn't easy finding room to store it all. We filled the shuttle-craft hangars, all our extra holds, and we've even got containers of that quinto-triticale in the less frequently used corridors of the ship.

"Fortunately, it was modular instead of bulk packed. Otherwise we would have had to repack every grain in smaller containers to fit on board. As it is, not only does the grain hamper movement throughout the ship, but there are a number of activities that will have to be limited, or even curtailed, until we deliver it to Sherman's Planet. For example, we can't use the Shuttle Bay at all."

"What about the possibility of repairing the damaged grain carrier?"

"Not a chance in a million, sir," Scott replied, shaking his head firmly. "Her engines were ninety-percent destroyed. She needs to be rebuilt, not repaired." He sighed deeply, "And we've still got that other robot ship to escort, too. I don't like it at all, sir."

"Nor do I, Mr. Scott. But well have to manage with the grain on board, somehow. Sherman's Planet needs it desperately."

"Aye, sir, aye ... I know." The chief engineer sounded resigned. "It's just that everything seems to happen at once sometimes, sir. Tribbles on the ship, quinto-triticale in the corridors, Klingons in the quadrant..." He shook his head at the injustice of it all. "Why, sir, it's enough to ruin your whole day."

"Let's hope the worst is over, Scotty." Kirk rose. "This meeting is adjourned, gentlemen." He reached under the table to deactivate the triple viewer. What he got for a response was a loud mew.

"They appear to be fond of you, Captain," Spock observed with a straight face.

"I'm not flattered." Kirk disgustedly removed the curious tribble from the control panel and hit the proper switch.

***

For a little while it seemed as if Kirk's wish might, come true - the worst of their difficulties might be past. Nothing happened in the next several hours that approached crisis proportions.

That did not mean, however, the *Enterprise* was without interesting activity. Down in a dimly lit corridor the glommer - forgotten by an introspective Jones - was stalking another tribble.

The glommer got within range, tensed, leaped - and was bucked off. Growling in surprise, it hopped after the retreating tribble. Quickly overtaking the tribble, it proceeded to ingest - the effort producing rather more commotion than ever before because the tribble it had pounced on was larger than a man's head. That tribble was almost more than the glommer could handle - almost.

The glommer paused a moment, belched, and sat recovering its strength. Discharging another deposit of converted tribble it promptly stalked off in search of further prey, now wobbling a little unsteadily from side to side.

***

The calm on the bridge did not last nearly as long as Kirk had hoped. He had hoped for five days of it, time enough in which to reach Sherman's Planet.

Instead, he had had only the few hours following McCoy's briefing before Spock broke the stillness. "Captain, sensors are picking up an approaching Klingon cruiser." A brief, hopeful pause, then, "It appears to be the *Devisor*."

Kirk had been standing talking to Sulu, now moved quickly to the Science Station for a personal check of the sensor

readouts. Damn! Damn Cyrano Jones and damn tribbles and damn the Klingon's persistence! He strode back to his seat, shoved the twenty-kilogram tribble off.

"Deflector shields up - stand by all phasers."

A sudden thought struck him and he eyed the tribble carefully. Wait a minute - a twenty-kilo tribble?

"How fat do these things get, anyway?" He hadn't noticed any this size when Jones had first come on board. Anyway, McCoy was not around to answer, and Spock was occupied. A second later Sulu removed all thoughts of tribbles.

"Klingon cruiser approaching rapidly, sir, on interception course. Phaser range in thirty seconds."

"Coming in fast," Spock commented with his usual objective detachment. "Obviously they can recharge their power cells in a matter of hours. Interesting, if true." He did not explain his cryptic final comment, and Kirk was too busy to ask about it.

"Mr. Arex, Mr. Sulu ... use the robot ship as a decoy. Have it change course and move off due west, up seventy degrees. We can use it to give the Klingons more trouble, since they can't paralyze more than one ship at a time with their field."

The *Devisor* continued to approach confidently as the remaining robot grain carrier peeled off on a new course. As soon as she was far enough off, Sulu activated the helm and the *Enterprise* also changed course.

"Commencing evasive tactics," he reported crisply.

Governed now in part by her battle computer, the *Enterprise* began an erratic weave designed to leave the Klingons with the minimum possible target. The Klingon ship adjusted its path correspondingly, but not to pursue.

"*Devisor* is veering away," Spock observed.

The battle cruiser fired a single powerful disruptor bolt - not at the starship, but at the remaining drone. The bolt neatly

severed the clumsy cargo module from the dual propulsion units.

"My error, Captain," Spock corrected. "They were not veering away. They were moving to attack the grain ship."

Sulu checked his gooseneck viewer. "But they didn't destroy it, sir." Kirk relaxed a hair. "They only wrecked the propulsion units. The cargo pod is intact." He looked up from the viewer. "Maybe we should modify our opinion of Captain Koloth's marksmen."

"It appears they are quite accurate," Spock concurred, "when firing on undefended cargo drones."

"They've changed course again," Sulu reported "They're coming in after us."

"Stand by phasers," Kirk warned.

"Phasers armed and ready, sir." Sulu's hand hovered over the firing switch. Arex shifted their position so that the main batteries would have an unobstructed line of fire on the *Devisor*. On the viewscreen, brilliant blue flares erupted from the cruiser's nose.

"Disruptors," Spock announced calmly.

A second later the bolts impacted on the *Enterprise* - only to sputter harmlessly on their shields. They felt a mild lurch as the ship reeled with the absorption of the tremendous destructive energy, but no one was knocked from their seat.

"Damage report, Mr. Sulu."

"No damage reported, sir," said the helmsman quickly. "Shields holding firm."

"Fire at will, Mr. Sulu."

"Firing, sir."

The battle continued for several minutes - long by intership standards - as the *Enterprise* and *Devisor* wheeled about a

common center which shifted every second. Disruptor bolts alternated with phasers, probing for a weakness in the absorbing screens. Multiple barrages glanced off, were handled by opposing defenses.

The repetitive rattling caused only minor damage on the two cruisers. The *Enterprise* suffered slightly more than the *Devisor* because the temporary cargo she was carrying in her corridors and holds was not secured for battle running.

Succeeding jolts broke open one grain container after another. Of itself, the damage was minor. The containers could be easily repaired, the grain recollected.

Except in a couple of corridors, corridors no one was watching because all were at battle stations - corridors where a concerted mewing and cooing suddenly rose appreciably in volume.

Like a fuzzy glacier, clumps of tribbles started creeping rapidly toward the protein-rich kernels of quinto-triticale.

Some of the tribbles were no longer very small...

III

Now was the time, Kirk decided, to see if his strategy had paid off. By this time, Captain Koloth was hopefully convinced that the *Enterprise* was armed only with phasers and he had adjusted his defenses accordingly. They had one chance to catch him napping.

"Photon torpedoes, Mr. Sulu. Fire."

"Torpedoes away, sir."

All eyes moved to the screen, where computer-guided deep-space scanners held the *Devisor* fixed on the screen like a bug under chloroform.

"Three, two, one ... impact," Sulu counted down. Then, "Torpedo miss."

But the image of the *Devisor* was starting to shrink. Spock checked his sensors, frowned. "They appear to be running away, Captain. Most odd. They did not use their stasis weapon at all."

"Maybe you were right, Mr. Spock, and they could only partly recharge their power cells, only enough to manage a conventional attack."

"Then why break off the engagement?" Spock wondered aloud. "I detect no sign of serious damage. Unless their attack achieved some unimaginable purpose."

"They disabled the robot carrier, " Sulu noted.

"Before they engaged us," mused Kirk. "No, Spock's right. It doesn't make sense. Koloth knew his battle capabilities before

he attacked." He shook his head, feeling they were missing something.

"Well, put a tractor beam on the disabled drone. We'll have to try and take it in tow."

"Now that could be their intention exactly, Captain," Spock suggested. "Towing the drone will be a drag both on our available power and maneuverability. We're already carrying the extra mass of the first carrier's cargo. Captain Koloth's engineers have undoubtedly calculated how much energy this will sap from our battle capacity."

"We can't do anything about the extra mass on board, Mr. Spock, but we could break the tow instantly in the event of another attack."

"That is true, Captain. But the *Devisor* could attack and run, attack and run. If Koloth is aware of the situation on Sherman's Planet he knows we are operating within certain time restrictions. Eventually his chances of catching us with the second drone under tow will increase."

"That seems logical," Kirk admitted.

"Thank you, Captain."

"Well, Mr. Spock?" he said, after a short pause.

"Well what, Captain?"

"You've already correctly analyzed the situation. We cannot tow the damaged robot ship indefinitely, nor can we abandon it. And there is no room for more quinto-triticale on board. I assume you have some suggestions as to what we can do."

Spock paused in thought, Vulcan gears turning at top speed. "Yes, Captain, we can throw tribbles at them."

Kirk's expression underwent a succession of variations. Arex's reaction was mostly internal, but much the same.

"I thought Vulcans didn't have a sense of humor," he finally ventured.

"We do not, Captain. Allow me to think this out."

Kirk regarded his first officer with a gaze of honest confusion.

Down in one of the lower storage holds a door had burst, flooding the deck with quinto-triticale. Instantly the hillock of golden-brown seeds was inundated by a horde of tribbles of impressive bulk.

At the base of the broken door the glommer was struggling with one of the tribbles. This particular one had the dimensions of a large, furry hassock. It ignored the furious, frustrated glommer on its topside and continued to munch contentedly on the sudden nutritious bonanza.

As Scott was returning to the bridge, he made a quick trip back to Engineering Central for a first-hand check on the amount of power the cargo drone tow was drawing. A harried security sergeant confronted him in a corridor, tried to babble an explanation of what he had seen. His story was enough to detour Scott temporarily from the bridge.

He was still talking when the elevator doors opened to the low deck. Scott needed less than two minutes to evaluate the situation and head for the bridge at top speed.

"Captain," he said, walking directly to the command chair, "we've got broken cargo pods in all the corridors, and some of the storage holds themselves have burst. The tribbles have gotten into the grain. No need to tell you what they're doing." He paused to catch his breath.

"Eating, I should suppose," observed Spock blandly. He glanced at the base of the navigation console significantly, where a fifty-kilo tribble had appeared. The enormous fur ball was rubbing at the legs of an irritated Sulu. Then Spock began making some quick computations at his console.

"Given the exceptional nutritive value of the hybrid grain, I should say that at their estimated rate of conversion these

altered tribbles will..."

"Altered!" Kirk stopped listening to Spock. "Get Cyrano Jones up here on the double, Scotty."

"Aye, sir." He headed for the elevator again while Uhura notified the brig.

Kirk rose and walked to the helm-navigation console, nearly tripping over an elongated tribble in the process. Glancing up occasionally at the main viewscreen for signs of the *Devisor*, he examined certain readouts.

"Any sign Of Captain Koloth's ship?"

"Nothing yet, sir," Sulu reported.

"Keep scanning. They'll probably come at us from a different quadrant this time."

It wasn't long before Scott reappeared, pushing a puzzled Cyrano Jones urgently before him.

"Ah, Captain Kirk. What can I do for you? From the attitude displayed by your chief engineer," and he looked reprovingly at Scott, who returned the favor with a glance suggesting that he would have liked to display Jones in the nearest converter, "I gather that it is a matter of some gravity."

"Not gravity - grain," Kirk corrected him furiously. "Your shribbles are all over my trip ... your tribbles are all over my ship." *Easy, James T., easy.* "My security personnel can't find them all, despite the fact," and he kicked at a hundred-kilo tribble where an eighty-kilo tribble had been only moments before, "that they're hardly inconspicuous anymore."

The tribble cooed, tried to rub against his ankle.

Jones shrugged. "You need better security men then, Captain. As you say, they shouldn't be hard to find." He looked interestedly at the apparition Kirk had just kicked.

With enormous effort, Kirk held his emotions in check. "Mr. Jones, you are in enough trouble already. Feeble attempts at humor will only exacerbate your situation." He returned to his station.

"Oh, Captain," Jones protested, "a harmless little tribble. What can they hurt?"

Kirk put his shoulder to the hundred-kilo tribble sitting in the command chair and shoved it out "Harmless? Maybe. But little? In any case, the main problem is that they're eating the quinto-triticale."

"The what?" Jones looked confused.

"The grain."

The trader looked troubled for the first time. "Captain, you have grain on this ship?"

"What?" Kirk was staring at the screen. Naturally the *Devisor* would show up any second. "Yes ... grain. Seed grain, to prevent a serious famine on Sherman's Planet. It won't be prevented if your tribbles continue eating at the rate they are."

"But they're hungry, Captain," Jones protested, spreading his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"So are the people on Sherman's Planet!" Kirk countered tightly. His shout echoed across the bridge. The gigantic purple tribble he had just pushed out of his seat mewed uncomfortably and edged away a little.

"A little tribble, Jones, doesn't eat much. A big tribble does. And these are getting bigger."

That's when it came to him.

"Jones, is this the ecological sabotage the Klingons are so mad about? Is this why Captain Koloth is willing to risk his ship to get you back7 The Klingons have a lot of pride, Jones. No wonder they want you."

The trader started to object, but a sudden shout from Sulu's station shattered the conversation.

"Captain, the *Devisor* is coming back."

There, he knew it was too much to hope for. Now he understood why the Klingons wouldn't break off the engagement.

McCoy chose that moment to enter the bridge. Both hands were full of tribble. "Jim, there's something about these tribbles..."

"Later, Bones," Kirk interrupted tiredly. He started to sit down, paused. The tribble in it weighed at least one hundred and forty but otherwise it was just like the one he'd shoved out a minute before.

Which raised another interesting question. How fat did the tribbles grow ... and how fast?

One crisis at a time. Panting, he shoved the tribble out of his seat once more, sat down.

"Mr. Sulu, release the tow on the robot carrier. All deflector shields on full. Stand by phasers and photon torpedoes." He paused and looked first at Jones and then McCoy. "And all non-combatants off the bridge."

McCoy nodded, took charge of Jones. But first he dumped the overflowing tribble he had been holding.

Everyone's attention was fixed on the screen, which now showed the approaching *Devisor* once again. Kirk diverted his attention long enough to thumb a certain switch under his right hand.

"Captain's Log, supplemental," he recited in a soft voice. "The Klingon battle cruiser *Devisor*, under command of Captain Koloth, appears about to force us into another battle for custody of the trader Cyrano Jones." He cut off. Elaboration would have to wait for leisure time.

On screen, the *Devisor* continued its relentless approach with little recourse to subtlety. Apparently this was to be another head-on attack like the first.

"Contact in thirty seconds," announced Spock.

"Ready photon torpedoes, Mr. Sulu."

The *Devisor* now filled the screen. An ominous cloud of fluttering azure began to form at its prow. Apparently the stasis projector was back in operation. And this time they had no robot ships to throw at it.

"Fire one, fire two."

"One and two away," Sulu announced. "Three, two, one ... impact." Seconds pause, then, "Minus one, minus two ... something's wrong, Captain. I show impact but no reaction."

"Are you positive, Mr. Sulu?"

"Absolutely, sir. We show definite..."

"I think I know what has happened, Captain," said Spock. "Both torpedoes impinged on the stasis field the *Devisor* is building. Considering the known power of such a field, I have no doubt that the drive and detonation mechanisms of the torpedoes were paralyzed when they reached it."

"Evasive emergency maneuvers, Mr. Sulu," was all Kirk could say.

"Aye, Captain."

Too late - the field enveloped the *Enterprise* even as Sulu directed a convoluted course across the starfield. Enveloped them in a rippling miasma of brilliant blue.

The *Enterprise* gave a sickening lurch. Kirk groaned inwardly. That had not done the weakened grain containers below any good. Little could be done to repair them while the ship remained on battle status.

And so in numerous corridors and holds, the tribble orgy continued unabated.

"That's done it," cursed Scott, looking up from his engineering console in anger and alarm. "We're caught again."

"Message coming in, Captain, over ship-to-ship hailing frequency," Uhura announced. Kirk sighed. He already had a fair idea of what the message would contain.

"Put it through, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir." Moments later a picture of Captain Koloth - a broadly grinning, self-satisfied Captain Koloth - appeared once more on the main viewscreen. Kirk noted the clarity of the image though he would not have objected to some distortion blotting out some of his smile.

Visual and aural communications were low-order field functions, of course, and thus were not affected by the stasis field, as were...

Something was trying to fuse in the back of his head. He could not spare the time to study it. Koloth wouldn't give it to him.

"Captain Kirk. I am so glad to see that you have not suffered any injury yet, nor," he looked to left and right, "have any of your crew. This pleases me. We will take control of your vessel intact, it appears."

"Not if I can help it," Kirk said grimly. Koloth's smile disappeared and barely controlled fury colored his cheeks.

"You cannot help it and *I want your prisoner, Captain*."

"Control yourself, Koloth, or you'll burst a blood vessel. Much as it pains me to admit to it, Cyrano Jones is a citizen of the Federation, and therefore is entitled to Federation protection. I am afraid I must refuse your request." He thought, added, "You have no idea how much it pains me to refuse your request."

"I regret any emotional upset it has caused you," Koloth continued with biting sarcasm. "If it will alleviate your agony any, Captain Kirk, let me assure you this is not a 'request.'" For an unguarded moment he sounded almost regretful - for a Klingon.

"Don't force me to take steps we will both regret."

"Not a chance," Kirk snarled. Stasis field or no, he had taken about all he could handle of Koloth.

"Close channel, Lieutenant," Kirk ordered, pacing near Sulu.

"With pleasure, sir." She hit a switch and Koloth's image abruptly faded from the screen.

Kirk started back to his seat ... and stopped, his lower jar descending slightly. Even a friend would have been hard put to interpret his expression.

A contentedly mewing tribble occupied the command chair. It weighed two hundred and fifty kilos if it weighed a gram. Folding his arms, Kirk turned to stare at the viewscreen again.

"Aren't you going to sit down, Captain?" Spock inquired.

"I think I'll stand for now, Mr. Spock - haven't you got some important computations to do?"

Spock hesitated, started to say something and thought better of it, turning back to his console.

***

Meanwhile, Captain Koloth and his first officer were deep in a strategy conference. The next move was theirs. Koloth finally muttered to Korax, "Initiate boarding plan C." The first officer's eyes lit and he replied enthusiastically.

"Yes, Exalted One!"

***

Kirk was still eyeing the behemoth tribble purring noisily in his chair when everything that had been floating loose in his head suddenly got together. He walked over to Scott, who was monitoring the engineering console and looking distraught.

"Mr. Scott," he instructed, a slightly dreamy, thoughtful expression on his face, "we are going to implement Emergency Defense Plan B."

"Yes, sir," Scott answered snappily. "Emergency Defense Plan B." A look of uncertainty came over him and he asked hesitantly, "Ah, Captain ... I don't believe I'm familiar with Emergency Defense Plan B."

"That's because it's only used in extremely unusual circumstances, Mr. Scott."

"Oh," the chief engineer commented.

"And also," he added, turning away, "because I've just made it up - thanks to a suggestion by Mr. Spock. Stand by."

"Standin' by, sir," Scott said, still puzzled but ready for orders.

Odd, Scott mused. The ship's engines and all of their weaponry were frozen; the Klingons were threatening to take over the ship; they were suffering under the combined appetites of an influx of Fafnirian tribbles - and yet it had seemed as if Kirk had a smile on his face...

***

Korax studied his personal timer. Twenty-two *kuvits* had passed since the final warning had been given to Captain Kirk of the *Enterprise*. It had taken that long to assemble the forces necessary to implement the assault plan. Kirk would never be able to claim he had not been given sufficient time to think over the surrender terms.

Now it was too late. He stood by the chief transporter officer of the *Devisor* and watched the first platoon of Klingon marines assemble in the transporter, chamber.

The sudden appearance of a large, well coordinated boarding party on board might not be a total surprise to the Federation crew ... but it should have no trouble overwhelming any resistance. The supposedly peaceful Federation starships carried no such trained attack groups.

He nodded to the officer in charge, who started to advance his men to positions within the transporter alcove. The officer took a step forward - and froze, gaping.

Something was materializing, not only in the alcove itself but in the room. Several marines moved aside, hands edging nervously toward their disruptor pistols. Had Kirk decided on the same course of action as Captain Koloth? It seemed wholly out of character, and yet...

The transporter effect intensified. Faint, huge silhouettes began to form. Abruptly, the effect faded - and every Klingon in the chamber recoiled in horror.

Suddenly, the room was filled with giant emotionally disturbed tribbles.

And in the corridors, in storage holds, in private rooms startled crew members were treated to the most unwelcome sight of tribbles abruptly materializing in front of them, behind them, and, in the case of one nearly suffocated dozer, on top of them.

Scott kept a close watch on his console and a ready ear to the com linkup with the transporters. Moving the tribbles to the *Enterprise*'s transporters at first had looked like an impossible task, until someone had suggested a method almost too simple.

All they had to do was have any human crew member demonstrate affection toward one of the furry goliaths. Whereupon, cooing and mewing like any healthy tribble, it would follow the coaxing human to any point in the ship.

Scott's smile widened. The Klingons, of course, would be utterly unable to duplicate this maneuver. No self-respecting

tribble would have anything to do with a Klingon. He didn't envy any member of the *Devisor*'s crew who tried.

Chief Kyle concluded this report at the other end of the com. Several stats were relayed to Scott, who surveyed them briefly, then looked over to the waiting Kirk.

"Emergency Plan B complete, sir. Chief Kyle reports all transporting has been carried out as directed."

"Open hailing frequencies, Lieutenant."

Uhura acknowledged and seconds later the portrait of an as yet unruffled Captain Koloth appeared on the screen.

"Captain Koloth, are you prepared to release my ship yet?"

Koloth stared back incredulously. "Release your ship? Kirk, you are monotonous. Your ship's armament is completely inoperative and in a few minutes you will not even have the option of surrender."

"That's not an option I require, Koloth," Kirk countered. "You don't know yet then, do you?"

"Know," said Koloth irritably. "Know what?"

"That we have immobilized your ship worse than you have immobilized ours."

"I doubt that. Our instruments report nothing except some fragmentary transporter activity and..." He paused and a thoughtful expression came over his face. "You could not transport any weapons aboard, of course, and you wouldn't attempt an assault with armed personnel, but..." A longer pause now.

"Kirk?"

"Yes, Captain? What seems to be the matter? Are you feeling all right? If not, I'd suggest..."

"Tribbles, Kirk?"

The Captain's grin grew even wider. "Tribbles."

Koloth started to say something, was interrupted as a Klingon junior officer entered the picture. The two conversed below range of the aural pickup for several moments. The junior officer spoke rapidly, punctuating his words with many erratic gestures. Koloth's face went through a repertoire of expressions surprising even for a Klingon. When the junior officer had left the picture, the *Devisor*'s commander turned slowly back to face the screen.

"Kirk, I am compelled by circumstances to reveal an Imperial scientific secret. When the full report of this incident is known, I shall probably be chastised for it. I may be broken. But under the circumstances I see no alternative.

"Cyrano Jones stole a Klingon genetic construct - an artificially produced creature - from one of our worlds. It was designed to be a tribble predator. It is the prototype, and the only one to survive many hundreds of attempts at cross-breeding.

"We must have it back. I am authorized to use any means to secure its return. I hope that includes imparting this sensitive information to you. The Imperium is willing to chance war to gain its return."

"Surely you don't expect me to believe you can't produce others?"

"That is precisely the situation, Kirk." A hint of desperation had crept into Koloth's voice. No talk of surrender now. "I am told that the production of this first success cannot be duplicated. Apparently its creation was as much the result of chance as careful planning.

"This specimen can, however, reproduce by asexual division. We must have it in order to produce others from it. And we need those to get rid of the tribbles Jones disposed of before they completely overrun the world on which he left them."

"And that's all you want - the predator?" Kirk asked.

Koloth gathered himself. "I am prepared to forgo my demand for the return of Jones. But we must have the glommer."

"Oh well," Kirk replied easily, "if that's all." He glanced back. "Mr. Scott, instruct Chief Kyle to transport the glommer over to the *Devisor*. We do have the glommer?"

"Aye, sir. Mr. Jones recovered it himself as we were drivin' the tribbles to the transporters."

Two security guards hustled Jones along between them some minutes later. He seemed somewhat reluctant to part with "his" glommer. It nestled under one of his arms. He was looking around wildly. His gaze finally settled on Scott, who had come down to join Kyle for the crucial transfer.

"You can't do this to me! Under space salvage laws it's mine." He stroked the glommer possessively and it growled softly once.

Scott sounded tried. "As you well know, a planetary surface is not exactly covered by free-space salvage statutes. But if it's a matter of sentimental attachment, that might put a different light on things, Jones."

The trader looked hopeful.

"If you're that attached to the little beastie, I wouldn't dream of separatin' the two of you."

Jones looked wary, but still hopeful. "And that is the case, Mr. Scott." He stroked it again, made babying noises at it. "I couldn't bear to be parted from my little glommer, after all we've gone through together. It's almost like a child to me, a part of my own self!"

"I understand," Scott confessed. "So ... we'll transport you over with it."

"Given the current situation and in the interests of interstellar cooperation," Jones said at breakneck speed, "I withdraw my claim."

Without shedding so much as a tear, Jones put the glommer in the transporter, backed out. Scott nodded to Kyle, who engaged the transporter.

On the bridge, Kirk noted the subsidence of the stasis field concurrent with the glommer's transporting. Resumption of full power was suitably detailed by Sulu and Arex. Almost immediately thereafter, the *Devisor* was seen moving away at high speed.

Kirk watched it go, feeling better than he had in some time. "At least we can submit a detailed report on the stasis weapon ... and although something will have to be found as a defense against it, it's far from being a superweapon. The power drain makes it vulnerable to a second ship. It's main value is in convincing us of its omnipotence, and we've exploded that possibility."

"Quite so, Captain," commented Spock thoughtfully. "Tribbles appear to be a much more effective weapon."

There was a buzz from his chair com and he acknowledged. "Yes?"

McCoy here, Jim. I'd like you and Spock to come down to the lab. I've made an interesting discovery."

After assuring himself that the *Devisor* was too far away to catch them even at top pursuit speed, Kirk took Spock and made his way down to Sick Bay.

Moments later they found themselves examining the single giant tribble Bones had saved for experimental purposes. It sat behind a glass wall and munched happily on leftovers from the third shift's lunch.

"You see, Jim, Jones' genetic engineering was very slipshod. He fooled us at first but it's doubtful he could have hidden the truth forever. These tribbles don't reproduce, just as he claimed ... when *they're normal sized.*

"But because he didn't slow their metabolism permanently, his secret would reveal itself eventually. These aren't giant

tribbles ... they're cooperative colonies. Like our coral, for example, only softer."

"Then that means...," Kirk began, staring at the hulking yellow tribble, "that..."

McCoy nodded silently.

Both of Spock's eyebrows went up.

***

On board the *Devisor*, Koloth was heading for the engine room. He was holding the glommer and stroking it gently. Since glommers shared their disposition, they didn't dislike Klingons. A frantic, excited Korax met him in the passageway.

"Captain, report from Chief Engineer Kurr. His people have had to evacuate the engine room and operate the ship on automatic because the main engine chamber is filled with tribbles."

"I know," Koloth replied with a vicious smile. "We can finally do something about that. Then we're going back after the *Enterprise*."

"But sir..." Korax was desperately trying to add something, but Koloth waved him off.

"You'll see, Korax."

Together, they approached the access door to the main engine room. While Korax stood back doubtfully, Koloth put the glommer on the deck opposite the door. Stepping back, he activated the door and focused his attention on the poised glommer.

In fact, his attention was so focused on the glommer that he did not notice the sudden alteration of his first officer's expression, nor what had caused it.

He spoke directly to the glommer. "Attack!"

The glommer seemed to lean back. And back ... and back. It gave a funny little shake, turned and rocketed off down the corridor in a series of olympian hops, making a sound like a dog with empty tin cans tied to its tail.

Koloth abruptly grew aware of another sound, a low, rhythmic rumbling which a Terran would have likened to an idling locomotive. To Koloth it sounded like approaching thunder.

The captain turned quickly, backed away from the source of that deep-throated pulsing. It was horrible, it was ghastly...

It was the angry mewing of a two-ton tribble that filled the *Devisor*'s engine room from floor to ceiling.

"He did it again," he swore. "That plated, overbearing excuse for a starship captain did it to us again!" He jabbed a finger at the growling colossus.

In such an emotional moment, even an Imperial board of inquiry would find reasons for absolving Koloth for an instinctive reaction.

Korax didn't stop to think, either. Instead, he whipped out his disruptor pistol and fired with admirable speed. The miniature bolts from the powerful hand weapon contacted the furry yellow wall. A bright flash temporarily blinded both officers.

Koloth felt the new pressure at his legs and waist even before vision returned. He tried to move ... first to his right, then left, forward and back. No luck. He was thoroughly pinned in place by ... something.

Another blink cleared his eyes and revealed the reason.

The entire corridor - all the way from the nearest bend to the depths of the engine room - was now hip deep in tribbles. Not giant tribbles but large normal tribbles. Very large normal tribbles.

Tribbles didn't like Klingons.

"Let us not panic, Korax," instructed Koloth. He was calm, he told himself. Quite calm. "Let us try to move one step at a time toward the nearest exit."

Both men tried to move, found that even the slightest attempt produced a frightening rise in the volume of mewing around them.

"I don't seem to be making any progress, Exalted One. Should I...?" He held up his disruptor pistol.

"Put that away, you idiot!" Koloth cursed ... but softly, softly. "Don't ever do that again. I'll break you to sanitation engineer ... twelfth class."

"Yes, sir," said an abashed Korax, suddenly aware of what he had been about to do. He put the pistol away slowly. Both officers stood in the sea of nervous tribbles and stared at each other.

After several long minutes, Korax ventured to ask, "What now, Exalted One?"

"Now, Korax? We wait till we are rescued, of course. I don't know what else to do. Have you any brilliant suggestions, perhaps?"

"No, sir. There's just one thing."

"Well, what is it?"

The first officer of the *Devisor* looked down.

"Either we're shrinking, sir, or these tribbles are getting bigger."

Koloth made a strangled sound...

***

Kirk, Spock, Scott and Jones stood in the lab and watched the giant tribble shiver while McCoy explained what was happening.

"A simple shot of neo-ethylene fixes everything, gentlemen. The catalyst drug induces the tribble colony to break down into its individual smaller units ... but also enables them to retain their engineered metabolic stability. These really will be safe tribbles."

Even as he spoke, the oversized tribble was rapidly collapsing into dozens of little, normal tribbles ... like a big fuzzy ice cube melting into chunks.

"What about the Klingons?" asked Jones.

McCoy thought a moment, spoke slowly. "Unless they discover how to treat their tribbles - and do so soon - the *Devisor* isn't going to be big enough for all of them. Even if they do so, of course, the smaller tribbles will still retain their dislike of Klingons."

Kirk turned to leave, stopped as he spotted something up near a Jeffries tube. "Say, here's one you didn't get, Bones."

McCoy came over, glanced up the tube also. "Yes, I did, Jim." He turned to inspect one of the small tribbles, let it crawl up his arm, purring.

"But it hasn't...," Kirk began. He was drowned out by a loud, muffled *flumpppp!* as the hidden giant colony suddenly dissolved into hundreds of component tribbles.

Kirk dug himself out of the mound of cooing, pulsing balls, spat out a mouthful of tribble fur and gazing imploringly heavenward.

"Someday I'll learn," he murmured solemnly.

"Aye, Captain," agreed Scotty, standing nearby and observing the talus of the hirsute avalanche. "But you've got to admit, if we have to have tribbles, it's best if all our tribbles are little ones..."

The orange tribble that Kirk threw mewed indignantly as it bounced off the chief engineer's retreating back...

THE SURVIVOR

(Adapted from a script by James Schmerer)

I

Space is not silent.

If one has the ears—the appropriate methods to listen with—the seeming emptiness and black desolation is transformed into a raucous chorus of bleeps, pops, whistles, and hums. The steady modulated whines of patient quasars, the discordant sizzle of black holes, and the stentorian drone of unseen pulsars—all contribute their voices to a heavenly choir of awesome complexity and rhythm.

From white dwarf to red giant, every sun exhibits its own distinctive, individual sizzle-plop in the same way that animals give off special odors, or flowers display color.

At this particular moment, in this typically insignificant corner of the universe, an exceptionally unusual sound was being generated. It came from a minute, irregularly shaped and rapidly moving object of considerably less than solar mass. And yet the sounds it was producing were at once less powerful and more distinctive than those given off by any sun, or pulsar, or radio nebula.

Anyone passing near this object would have needed very, very sensitive instruments indeed to pick up the sound at all. But if one *had* the proper detection equipment and an enormous quantity of amplification at immediate disposal, one might just be able to hear:

"Deck the halls with boughs of holly, fa-lalala-lala-lalala . . . 'Tis the season to be jolly, fa . . .!"

But by then, of course, the *Enterprise* would have shot far out of detector range.

Once a year the tree was carefully unwrapped and lifted from its special cold-storage compartment in the bottom of the starship's cold-storage room. Then, amid much gaiety and boozing, it was set up in the main crew lounge and decorated with everything from genuine gingerbread cookies to holographic angels.

It was a real evergreen, too—as fine and upstanding a tannenbaum as any celebrant could wish for. No one minded that it had sprung from the soil of a world unknown to Man when words were first spoken on his moon.

A group of engineers and technicians had organized an unprofessional but enthusiastic barbershop quartet near the base of the glowing tree. They were caroling away lustily to the accompaniment of a small electric piano.

Lt. Uhura leaned against the fake fireplace set up nearby. She was talking to a tall young ensign from quartermaster section. Every so often she'd emphasize some point or other by jabbing him in the chest with a finger—one of those not wrapped around a glass.

For his part, the ensign was still unsure about how to react. On the one hand, the sudden unexpected situation involving the most desirable lieutenant on the ship was developing promisingly. On the other, he couldn't forget that she was his superior officer. Given the current lack of equilibrium the senior lieutenant was displaying, he'd have to be careful things didn't turn awkward.

"Lischen . . . listen, Ensign Burns . . . I tell you there's nothing like working in communications! Communication is the most important, most necessariest section on this ship. Why, without communication we . . . we couldn't talk to each other!" She seemed overwhelmed at this sudden insight.

"I ask you . . . where'd the *Enterprise* be without communications? Where!"

"I couldn't agree with you more, Lieutenant," agreed Burns, cautiously slipping an agreeing arm around her shoulders. "Of course, we should bear in mind that there are all kinds of communication . . . here, let me get you a refill. I have some interesting theories of my own which I'm sure would benefit greatly from the comments and suggestions of a senior officer like yourself.

"If you could spare a minute . . . I've drawn up some interesting schematics that . . ."

On the far side of the lounge, Engineer Scott had corralled Spock at an unoccupied table. The surface between them was swamped with seemingly numberless sheets of paper filled with hurriedly roughed-out engineering diagrams.

"Now you see here, Spock," Scott was saying intensely, tracing a rather wobbly line on one sheet with his drafting pen, "this is—" He paused and stared disapprovingly at the *Enterprise*'s first officer.

"Och, smile, Spock, why don't you? 'Tis the season to be jolly, fa-lalala . . ."

Spock's reaction was similar to the one he'd already used several times that day, in response to the sudden explosion of illogical activity. To him this "season" seemed a cyclical madness that, fortunately, had to be borne only once a year.

But, by Vulcan's long deserts, it was hard on him.

"I am sorry, Mr. Scott. First of all, I do not 'fa-lala,' as you well know. Also, even if this were my holiday and not yours, I do not think I could bring myself to perform even the slightest of the many unreasonable activities that seem to be the normal method of celebration.

"For one thing, Vulcans do not voluntarily pollute their bloodstream with odd combinations of ethyl alcohol molecules." That seemed to outrage the chief and he drew back in stunned disbelief.

"Pollute? Mr. Flock, do I understand you to be sayin' . . .? Are you callin' . . .? Do you mean to say that you regard this outstandin' eggnog as a *pollutant*?"

"I believe that is what I just said, Mr. Scott. Really, if you cannot see—"

"No. No, that's all right, Block, I see. I see, all right." He shoved his chin out and managed to look like a Scottish martyr. He started gathering up armfuls of drawings. They overflowed his arms and fell to the floor. When he bent over to retrieve those that had fallen, he lost another set.

"If that's the way you feel about it," he continued, picking up one and dropping three, "I'll just have to find someone else to share this with. Someone who can appreciate my design. Someone who'll be happy to share the income."

Apparently deciding he'd reached the point of diminishing returns as far as dropped papers were concerned, he turned and staggered off in the direction of a knot of nearby subengineers, dripping diagrams all the way. The

subengineers saw him coming, but couldn't get out of the way fast enough.

Spock watched him go. A hand touched his shoulder, and he turned 'round, looking up at the new arrival.

"Hello, Captain." Spock's first worry—that he might find the *Enterprise*'s commanding officer in a state similar to that of its chief engineer—was unfounded. On the contrary, Kirk's face was noticeably devoid of seasonal spirit. His current expression was a mixture of curiosity and puzzlement.

"Something is happening?"

Kirk nodded. "It's probably nothing important, Mr. Spock. As you know, meteor activity has been unusually heavy in this sector for two days now. This morning, Sulu thought he'd detected a blip in the normal shower pattern that shouldn't have been there. I checked his readings and the computer seems to confirm them. There's something moving in the shower that's acting very unmeteorlike.

"Still, it may be nothing more than a somewhat different hunk of cosmic flotsam—but it's drifting in a course almost parallel to ours. Since it's not out of our way, I told Sulu to veer toward it"

"Any idea what it might be, Captain?"

Kirk looked skeptical. "Sulu thinks it might be a ship."

"You have of course considered our position?"

Kirk nodded. "I know we're on the edge of the Romulan Neutral Zone, Mr. Spock. If it is a ship, there's the chance it might be Romulan. Regardless—" He glanced around the lounge, in which the noise level had risen several unsteady decibels in the last few minutes, "if you can spare a moment away from the local hilarity, I'd appreciate your presence on the bridge."

"I assure you, Captain, I can spare a great deal more than a moment."

Spock continued his thoughts as they started moving toward the bridge-elevator.

"In fact, sometimes, Captain," and he looked back to where Ensign Burns was now chasing Uhura around the tree, "I often wonder how you humans ever managed to discover fire." Kirk hit the elevator switch, and they entered the lift.

"Sometimes, Mr. Spock, we aren't quite sure ourselves." He nudged the lever that sent them rising toward the bridge.

Spock said nothing for a while as the lights indicating other decks flashed past. But Kirk knew his first officer well enough to tell that something was digging at him.

"What is it, Spock?"

"An absurdity, Captain. It is merely that Engineer Scott was forcing me to look at plans for . . ." He paused awkwardly in midsentence, something he rarely did.

"Captain, do you think there would be much of a market on human-populated worlds for a four-dimensional Christmas tree?"

"A what? Mr. Spock, have you been . . .?"

"Captain, I do not object to the diverse ingredients included in the liquid solution known as eggnog . . . though I find many of them frivolous rather than nutritional. But please rest assured the beverage itself has no attraction for me.

"Besides, I believe I may be allergic to nutmeg."

Kirk lost the answer to Spock's original question in the atmosphere of this rarified possibility.

Mr. Sulu was the only officer at station on the bridge. On special occasions Kirk sometimes allowed the *Enterprise* to cruise free, operating on the reasonable theory that no one had yet found a way to get a computer drunk. Sulu would have his own chance at losing control of himself when the starship changed over to the next shift.

For now, the helmsman's full attention was focused on his fore scanners.

"We're coming up on the object now, Captain."

"How's shower activity, Mr. Sulu?" Kirk slipped easily into the command chair and Spock moved to the library computer station.

"Heavy, sir, but not abnormal. Our shields and deflectors are handling it easily." Concern was in his voice. "But from what I can read, that ship out there hasn't done nearly as well."

"It is a ship, then?"

"Yes, sir." He made a delicate adjustment to a control. "Should have it on the screen any second now."

The main viewscreen blurred, then cleared. Meteors that occasionally shot across the field of vision moved too fast to be seen, but the tiny craft centered in the viewfinder stood out sharply in amplified starlight.

Its design was compact and very expensive. Only the very rich could afford to put warp-drive engines in small ships. That maxim held true for governments as well as individuals.

Right now, however, the ship looked more like a prime candidate for the scrapyard. The rear section had been twisted and bent in places by some violent, overwhelming force. The engines weren't twisted or bent because they weren't there anymore. The whole power plant was missing, torn from the stern of the battered craft.

Numerous gaping holes showed in the mid- and fore-sections as well. It was a choice hunk of junk.

"Take us in closer, Mr. Sulu."

"Aye, sir."

Matching velocity and direction with care, the helmsman edged the *Enterprise* close to the small vessel. It was a feat made possible only with the aid of the starship's navigational computer. No human could handle so many complex calculations alone.

"It's not a Romulan, anyway," Kirk muttered. He was mildly relieved. Realistically, aiding a distressed craft could in no way be interpreted as warlike. Not by humans or Vulcans, anyway. But the Romulans were not always realistic. They had some peculiar ideas as to what constituted an aggressive act. At least Kirk would be spared that worry. Instead he could concentrate his thoughts on the plight of the survivors, if any.

He didn't have to consult the computer records to see that the tiny craft was of Federation design and make. "Close scan, Mr. Sulu."

Sulu touched a switch. Immediately the rear section of the injured ship seemed to jump out at them. Moving slowly forward along the pitted fuselage, the telescopic scanner finally stopped on a set of identification numbers. Set just behind the living area, the glowing numbers were barely intelligible. A near-miss by a small chunk of iron-nickel had almost obliterated them.

"I have it, Captain," noted Spock. That was the signal for Sulu to move the scanner further along the side of the craft.

"I am now checking the number against Federation records." There was a short pause and then Spock added idly, "I might also say, Captain, that unless you are wrong and it *is* possible to induce a state of inebriation into computers, our sensors claim that at least one occupant of that ship is still alive."

Kirk's surprise was genuine. He hadn't really expected that a ship this badly hulled, drifting alone in a little-visited sector of space, might still be able to sustain life.

Still, they didn't know how long the vessel had been drifting helplessly or when its power plant had been destroyed. Its life-support systems could have been successfully sealed off from the rest of the damage and might have continued to function on stored emergency power, but—The state of the ship indicated otherwise.

Yet life-sensors rarely made mistakes.

Possibly someone else was due for a merry Christmas.

"Mr. Sulu. Since Lt. Uhura is . . . uh, otherwise engaged, I'd like you to try contacting that ship."

"Trying, sir," replied the helmsman, as he rerouted basic communications through his own board. There was a pause of several minutes, after which Sulu looked back and shook his head slowly.

"Nothing, sir. Not even a carrier wave. And no SOS."

Kirk tried to sound philosophical. "I guess it's too much to expect any of their communications equipment to have survived intact. Not after the beating she's taken. Your occupant may still be alive, Mr. Spock, but I wouldn't bet that he or she is in very good condition." He nudged a switch on his armrest.

"Sick Bay—Dr. McCoy, please. Captain calling." All that came back over the intercom was a muffled and suspiciously feminine giggle. "Bones, are you there?" An unidentifiable fumbling sound followed.

"Here, Jim. What's up?" Kirk suppressed an urge to echo McCoy's query and follow up his own curiosity. Instead he managed to concentrate on the problem at hand.

"Bones, we've run across a small Federation ship. It's a derelict, been through the mill, but according to our sensors at least one survivor is on board. We can't be sure yet. I'm going to have them beamed aboard, and you'd better be standing by in the transporter room."

"Okay, Jim." The giggle sounded again, and McCoy switched off—rather hurriedly, Kirk thought. He sighed, turned to Spock.

"Anything on the ship itself, yet?"

"Not yet, Captain. But we should have some information soon. I have already established that it is not a government vessel. Private listings of interstellar ships require rather more time to check thoroughly. I will join you and Dr. McCoy in the transporter room."

"All right, Spock."

McCoy was already waiting when Kirk arrived in the transporter chamber. The doctor was engaged in amiable conversation with Transporter Chief Kyle. Chatting ceased abruptly when Kirk entered and he had the impression their discussion had been on matters other than the derelict ship. McCoy struggled to put up a concerned front.

"Do we know anything about her yet, Jim?"

"Only that she is Federation, that she's probably privately owned, that in all likelihood she contains no more than one survivor, and fix your shirt."

McCoy looked down at himself and fumbled quickly with his clothing. Kirk nodded to the transporter chief.

"All right, Mr. Kyle," he ordered dryly. "The doctor is ready. Bring 'em aboard."

"Yes, sir."

A familiar musical whine started to rise in the room. Spock walked in and moved to stand between Kirk and McCoy as the transporter effect began to build.

"Readings indicate only one person aboard, Captain," informed Kyle. Kirk acknowledged.

"Thank you, Chief." He glanced at his first officer. "Have you identified her, Mr. Spock?"

"Yes, Captain," Spock replied quietly, keeping his eyes fixed on the reception alcove. Was there a hint of suppressed excitement in Spock's voice?

"You may find it difficult to believe—as difficult as I find it—but the vessel is registered to Carter Winston. I cross-checked, triple-checked. There is no mistake."

"*The* Carter Winston?"

Spock nodded once.

"That's impossible, Spock!" objected McCoy. He had recognized the name instantly, too. So had Kyle, but the transporter chief was too busy to give vent to his disbelief.

Everyone knew what Carter Winston had been.

"Carter Winston's been missing and presumed dead for over five years."

"It is possible, Doctor," mused Spock unemotionally, "that he is no longer missing." Kirk gestured towards the alcove where the outline of a figure was building.

"We'll know in a minute, gentlemen."

The outline began to fill in, become solid. Gradually certain characteristics established themselves. The figure was bipedal, human, male. Effect solidified and the glowing mist became man. At the same time, Kyle deftly dropped the single remaining control lever all the way down and snapped off power.

No one spoke.

A simple coverall suit of rich brown wood colors clothed the man. Its top was inlaid with accenting gold thread. The garment was a mixture of the restrained and expensive. A lime-gold aura still surrounded him, the product of the life-support belt encircling his waist.

The new arrival looked them over briefly, then stepped off the platform and switched off his belt. The aura vanished. It was obvious that as a doctor, McCoy's presence was superfluous. The survivor looked none the worse for wear after what must have been, at its mildest, a devastating ordeal.

Physically he seemed untouched, not so much as a scratch marring his attractive, famous features. Although now in his late thirties, his long absence had apparently not affected his

athlete's body. After half a decade of nonexistence he showed no signs of deprivation.

He smiled slightly—his famous smile.

"Incredible!" McCoy finally managed to stutter, breaking the silence. "It *is* him!"

"Carter Winston," Kirk murmured, in tones usually reserved for addressing Starfleet admirals. It was appropriate. The man standing so composedly before them was a legend. Dead legends are not supposed to come back to life. The men grouped in the transporter room could be permitted a little awe.

Winston bestowed a curious, bemused glance on each of them in turn. A second later he showed that there was nothing the matter with his vocal cords, either.

"It seems you gentlemen know me." Kirk stepped forward and shook his hand.

"There are few in the Federation who wouldn't recognize you, sir. Even after all this time. It's good to know you're no longer a piece of history.

"I'm Captain James Kirk, commanding this vessel. It's an honor to have you aboard the *Enterprise*." He gestured in turn to each of the others.

"My first officer, Mr. Spock. Dr. McCoy, senior medical officer —" McCoy stepped forward and shook hands exuberantly.

"I'm especially honored to meet you, Mr. Winston. I expect your being alive means more to me than to the others. You see," he hesitated slightly, "my daughter was going to school on Cerberus ten years ago, when the crop failure occurred."

"Ah, yes," Winston murmured, "Cerberus."

McCoy looked over at Kirk, then back at Winston.

"It was estimated that fifty to sixty percent of the population would have starved if Winston, here, hadn't used his—well, you remember the stories.

"Bureaucracy in the Cerberus Crisis moved at two speeds—dead slow and slower than dead. But Winston spent his personal fortune to bring in enough food and goods to carry the Cerberus II inhabitants through the danger period until those idiots," and he spoke the word with as much bitterness

as Kirk had ever heard from him, "at Administration got themselves straightened out."

Kirk recalled the incident faintly and was impressed with the memory. He wasn't as intimately acquainted with the Cerberus incident as McCoy, but he remembered some of the resulting tremors. There had been a real shakeup in certain sections of Starfleet Command. One of those rare instances where ministers and executives in high positions actually lost their jobs.

"One of the many stories I've heard about you, Mr. Winston. It's a great pleasure for all of us to see you alive and well."

"Thank you, gentlemen." Winston smiled again, the same infectious grin that had more than once graced broadcast screens from the Far Arm to Earth itself—and had helped to build one of the greatest if most unstable fortunes of all time.

"I'd like to say it's a pleasure to be on the *Enterprise*, but frankly, after what I've been through these last five years, it'd be a pleasure to be on board a pressurized bathtub."

The four humans shared a convivial laugh. Spock waited and watched impatiently. There were a couple of things he badly wanted to say, and he had held his peace while jovial greetings had been exchanged.

"There is one person aboard who will be especially glad to learn that you are alive—Lieutenant Anne Nored of our Security Section."

Winston kept his composure, but not enough to hide the shock he obviously felt.

"My fiancée! Anne's aboard this ship?"

"Yes, doesn't it please you?"

McCoy broke in before an astonished Winston had a chance to reply. "How did you know that, Mr. Spock?"

"As soon as it was determined that the craft we located was registered to Mr. Winston, I began processing information on him on the chance that he was the lone survivor. The information concerning his engagement to Lieutenant Nored was in the capsule summary the computer produced. It is a surprise to me too, doctor." He turned back to Winston.

"We will notify her as soon as we have verified and processed your credentials, sir. If you have your identity tapes

with you . . .?"

"Spock!" McCoy looked angry. "Of all the coldblooded, inhospitable and inhuman requests I've ever heard—"

"I believe the regulations are quite clear on the matter, Doctor," replied a composed Spock. "An immediate identity check and full medical examination are standard procedure in situations such as this. Despite the unusual nature of the rescue, I find no reason for deviating from procedure."

McCoy clearly felt otherwise and seemed prepared to say so. But Kirk, after a questioning glance at Spock, moved quickly to ease the awkward moment.

"Spock's right, Bones. Be sensible."

McCoy hesitated and still looked upset, but said nothing.

"And I understand, of course," smiled Winston. "My credentials, Captain." He reached into a suit pocket and withdrew a small microtape cassette. Kirk gave it a curious, cursory glance. Tape models had changed slightly in five years. If nothing else, the cassette Winston held out to him was genuine as to age.

"We'll get through the formalities as rapidly as possible, Mr. Winston. Bones, why don't you take our guest down to Sick Bay and run him through a standard medical check."

McCoy nodded, smiled at Winston. "I was going to suggest a twelve-course meal first, but it *would* be a good idea to make sure your insides are in shape to appreciate it. I'll make it fast, Mr. Winston."

The two men left the chamber, chatting excitedly. McCoy was doing most of the talking as the elevator doors slid together in front of them, but that didn't surprise Kirk. After all, a man can miss a lot of news in five years.

"Five years! It's still hard to believe, Spock."

"I know, Captain." The two officers turned into the small briefing room. It was the nearest place to the transporter chamber that had the proper computer-access module.

"Nonetheless, he produced his identity tapes immediately. His actions so far have been perfectly normal. Oh, maybe he's a bit composed for someone who's been out of touch with civilization for five years, but—"

"It is a part of his character. Yes, Captain, everything seems to indicate that he is, indeed, Carter Winston."

"We'll know in a minute." Kirk took a seat at the briefing table and activated a small switch set into the compact console in front of him.

"Ship's log, please." There was a short pause, then a soft beep indicating that the computer had recognized his voice and would now deign to record. Kirk spoke into the small grid set into the tabletop.

"Captain's log, supplemental. The *Enterprise* has rescued a living legend—the foremost interstellar trader of our time, Carter Winston. Who, as I recall, has acquired a dozen fortunes, only to use his great wealth again and again to aid Federation colonies in times of need or disaster.

"Altogether a remarkable man and one who many people, myself included, are glad to discover is still alive. We are in the process of carrying out standard postrescue identification procedures." He hit another switch, then slipped the microtape cassette into a slot that had suddenly appeared in the desk.

"Library computer—process identification tapes on male human known as Carter Winston. Verification of identity requested." A three-sided viewscreen popped out of the desk top. It immediately displayed a set of fingerprints in triplicate. These were followed in rapid succession by a series of retinal patterns, oscilloscope readings, and other information.

"Working," informed the slightly feminine machine voice. There was a muted hum.

"Identification positive," it finally declaimed. Kirk gave an inward sigh. Of *course*, it was Carter Winston! The need for Spock's logical mind to cross *t*'s and dot *i*'s had made him overcautious.

The computer continued. "Identification confirmation follows: fingerprints positive, voiceprints positive, retinal relief positive. All registration and documentation in order."

"Original visual display, please." The abstracts disappeared to be replaced by a hologram of Winston. Except for a few touches Kirk quickly ascribed to normal aging, it differed in no way from the man they had beamed aboard. An extra line

here, a slight softening of flesh there. Both men studied the 'gram for another minute. Then Kirk hit the switch, and the tripartite screen sank back into the table.

He leaned back in the chair and gazed across the table at his first officer. "Well, everything checks out. So we have a distinguished passenger for a while. I expect he won't exactly be a dull guest—ought to have one or two stories to tell."

"It would seem so, Captain. I am much relieved."

"You worry too much, Spock. And now, if you'll excuse me —" Kirk moved briskly out of the chair. "It's time for me to go and pollute myself with exotic combinations of protein solids and ethanol molecules."

"*Et tu*, Captain? You were listening."

Kirk only grinned as they exited the briefing room.

II

"If you'll just lie down over there," requested McCoy, indicating the nearby examination table. Winston hopped up on the slightly tilted platform. With the air of one thoroughly enjoying a relaxed position, he stretched out and put both hands under his head.

McCoy walked to a nearby cabinet and selected a compact general scanner.

"This won't hurt a bit, Winston," he said easily as he moved to stand next to the table. "Just a few minutes and we'll be all through." He smiled, flicked a switch on the scanner. Starting at the top of Winston's head, McCoy moved the instrument down the man's body, holding it roughly ten centimeters above him.

After passing over his feet, McCoy flicked the device off and checked the readouts. His smile slipped away and was replaced by a slight frown of puzzlement.

Winston noticed it, too. "Is there some problem, Doctor? Don't tell me—I'm pregnant!"

McCoy managed a smile. "Scanner seems a little off. Just a second." He adjusted dials, rechecked the readouts. "Calibration must be off," he muttered to himself. He nudged the activation switch again and played the pickup over his own upper torso, examined the results. His puzzlement deepened.

Mumbling with the air of someone who's just seen a ghost and prefers to pretend it wasn't really there, he turned back to Winston.

"Let's try it again."

Once more the scanner was played down the survivor's prone form. Once more the resultant numbers on the tiny gauges brought deepening confusion.

"Odd. Some slight deviations here and there I could understand. You've been isolated for five years. It's no surprise that your body might have picked up some funny

radiation, or something. A couple of abnormal readings are to be expected. It's just that . . ." he looked down at Winston with a worried stare, "I've never gotten any readings quite like these from a human being before."

Winston laughed easily, clearly amused by McCoy's confusion. "Are you suggesting I'm not quite human, doctor? By the way, Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas to you, Winston. No, of course not. Anyway, the differences are all fractional." His smile returned. "Sometimes even the best medical instrumentation goes haywire. I don't get to overhaul it with major hospital facilities very often. Must be the scanner.

"Occasionally the transporter can do peculiar things to a body, too, leaving lingering effects that disappear as the internal structure readjusts. How are you feeling?"

Winston spread his hands, looked bemused. "Just great, Doc."

"Well, then—"

"I beg your pardon, Dr. McCoy." The doctor turned. Nurse Chapel had stepped into the examination room from the nearby reception area.

"What is it, Christine?"

"Doctor, the captain has been calling. He wants to know if the examination has been completed."

"Ummm, yes, I suppose it has."

"And doctor, Lt. Nored is waiting to see Mr. Winston—as soon as you've certified his medical status."

"Thanks, Christine." She smiled and left. McCoy turned back to Winston. "Well, I certainly don't want to keep you from your fiancée." He turned and yelled towards the open door. "Send her in, Christine."

He offered Winston a last smile, one he also shared with the woman who passed him in the doorway.

She was dressed in the red uniform of a senior security officer. Not stunning, no, but she was damned attractive in an unassuming sort of way. As befitted a security officer, she was in excellent physical shape, which was more than could be said for her state of mind just then.

"Carter—"

She held herself pretty well in check until she was almost to him. Then her reserve cracked and she threw herself into his arms. Caught off-balance, his arms went around her automatically as he stumbled.

His own reaction was considerably less emotional. Calm, cool, and—something else. Something as yet undefinable.

She was alternately sobbing and talking a blue streak. He let her ramble on for several minutes before moving his hands up to her shoulders and pushing her gently away—gently, but firmly.

"I'm sorry, Anne." The sorrow in his voice seemed genuine. "I never thought we would meet again."

She studied his face. As she did so, her expression changed from one of relief and pleasure to one of confused uncertainty.

"What is it, Carter? What's the matter?" Winston replied without hesitation.

"When I left on that final journey, Anne, I fully intended it to be my last. One supreme foray into unknown regions to bring my finances back to where they'd been before. After that, I would return and marry you. But my ship was disabled, and I crashed on the planet Vendor. I'm told I was lucky to have survived at all. The Vendorians managed to help me repair my ship. I left their world after four years of hard work, only to be disabled in space once again."

"But you've been rescued, you've survived," she almost shouted. "You're alive and we're together again! Nothing's changed." Winston looked away from her.

"Anne, I've changed. First there was the surgery—a lot of surgery. Skin grafts, bone regeneration, replacement of damaged organs with artificial ones, blood replacement. The Vendorians are excellent surgeons." He smiled slightly at some distant memory. "They said I was more banged up than the ship.

"After they put me back together again, the Vendorians assigned one of their own people to look after me and nurse me back to health?"

All this was very interesting—fascinating, even—but it did nothing to explain Winston's original statement.

"But you said you've changed, Carter. How? I don't see any change."

"It's not a visible kind of change, Anne. It's a kind that—" He paused. Abruptly he seemed to give up any attempt at further explanation.

"It's over between us, Anne. I can't really explain why, or how, but it's *over*. I didn't expect to have to go through this. All I can say now that it's happened is that I can't marry you, ever." He continued to watch her quietly.

Her mouth moved but no sounds came out. Everything had happened so suddenly and seemingly so well. Even his first bits of explanation appeared to leave room for hope. Then he had abruptly grown firm and inflexible, hitting her with a declaration as blunt and cold as the dark side of the moon.

She turned and, ran from the room, leaving Winston sitting alone on the cold examination table, staring after her.

Kirk had performed the ceremonial gesture of drinking with the crew—sharing their spirits, so to speak. But he'd returned to the bridge soon enough. Now he was back in the command chair, using a light-writer to mark orders on a glass plate lined with metal. A young yeoman, Ayers, stood to one side, awaiting the captain's bidding.

Nodding in satisfaction, he read back over the orders, signed the plate and handed it to her.

"See these are delivered to the proper stations and processed through, Yeoman." Ayers saluted and left the bridge.

A slight wave of dizziness assailed Kirk. He put a hand to his forehead. Possibly he'd overdone the annual Christmas camaraderie. He might be better off in his cabin for a while. It was one thing for the general crew to wander around mildly dazed during the holidays, but the captain was expected to remain cold sober at all times—in public, anyway.

"Take the conn, Mr. Spock. I'll be in my cabin, completing the report on Winston's rescue."

"Very good, Captain."

Kirk rose and headed for the bridge-elevator. Spock shifted from the library station and took over the command chair.

Kirk thought about the report as he made his way from the second elevator to his private quarters. He was still thinking about it after he'd kicked off his shoes and sat down at his desk. His finger activated the recorder, but for long moments he just sat and considered, unable to find anything to say. It was all so incredible, so utterly impossible.

Five years completely out of touch with civilization! And who knew how much of that had been spent drifting free in space, without another human being for company.

Oh, there were records of people surviving even longer periods of time adrift. The trouble was never with their bodies, but with their minds. Yet Winston seemed as sane and composed when he'd stepped out of the transporter as if he'd been gone only a day or two.

Kirk shook his head in admiration. It had always been said the man was a remarkable person. Plenty of stories testified to it—the Cerberus incident being only one of many—and now Kirk knew it from personal experience.

He was about to start dictating when the door chime demanded his attention.

"Come—"

The door slid back silently, and Winston walked in.

"I hope I'm not intruding, Captain?"

"No, please come in, Mr. Winston. I was just about to finish off the official report on your rescue." He grinned. "When Starfleet makes the details available, the news people will go crazy. You're liable to be faxed to death the moment you set foot on Federation soil."

"I expect as much." Winston smiled back. "I've been down to inspect my ship. Your people were kind enough to stow it in the shuttle bay. You know, the steering propulsors still operate. Remarkable."

Kirk turned away, hunting for the microtape analysis of Winston's ship. "Yes, it's an understatement to say the ship suffered severe damage. It'll never travel at warp-speed again, but some of the systems still function and are

salvageable. And there are all your expensive fittings to consider.

"Anyway, I've had my chief engineer examine it thoroughly and draw up a full report for you. It's here somewhere—"

Winston crossed his arms over his chest. There was nothing particularly unusual in the gesture.

The results were otherwise.

His outline seemed to flutter, to blur, and then to flow like a thin, phosphorescent clay. The flow slowed, stopped.

Where Winston had stood now rose a hideous, multicolored something. It had seven thick tentacles which met at the top and merged to form an oval bulge encircled with convex lenses. The lenses pulsed with faint light.

One of the tentacles lifted from the floor. It touched Kirk gently, almost caressingly, on the back of the neck. The captain's eyes closed. Other tentacles moved to catch the slumping form. The creature lifted the unconscious Kirk and carried him effortlessly to the bed. Only a few seconds had passed from transformation to attack, and everything had been done in complete silence.

Now the thing stepped back from the bed and crossed a pair of tentacles over its upper body—it had no recognizable chest. Again the blur, the watery flow. Once more the creature changed and became human.

It didn't become Carter Winston.

But it was human, nonetheless, and immediately recognizable.

It was Captain James T. Kirk.

Nurse Chapel entered the examination room from the laboratory area and moved to where Dr. McCoy sat engrossed in detailed inspection of a medical-engineering manual. She held the small hand scanner in one hand and several smaller supplementary instruments in the other. McCoy glanced up from his reading.

"Well, Christine?"

"Doctor," she said firmly, "I can't find a single thing wrong with these instruments. They all check out perfectly, including

the principal scanner. But the readings still come out slightly off, still show those funny variations on Winston." She watched him expectantly.

"What about the other tests you ran on Winston, after—" She hesitated. Two things travel faster than the speed of light —starships and gossip. Romantic gossip fastest of all.

McCoy shrugged. Some things were impossible to keep secret. "After Anne Nored left? Some of them were off, some weren't. The differences don't even have the virtue of consistency, Christine. As it stands, these results make no sense at all. It's got to be our mistake." He stood.

"Come on. We'll evaluate those readings again, and this time we're going to find the answer."

The elevator doors opened onto the bridge, and Winston/Kirk entered. Spock looked back at him and rose from the command chair. Winston/Kirk took the seat as the first officer returned to his own station.

Sulu glanced back at the command chair with interest. "Weren't you going to your cabin, sir?"

"I've already been there, Mr. Sulu, but something came up before I could get started on the report. Something much more important. Lay on a direct course for Rator III." That prompted another look, this time of more than just casual interest.

"Through the Romulan Neutral Zone, sir?"

"That was an order, Helmsman."

Sulu looked uncertain. "But sir, if we're challenged in there, the Romulans can confiscate the ship. The treaty states that —"

"I am fully conversant with the terms of the treaty, Mr. Sulu," responded Winston/Kirk, "and I believe you heard my order."

"Aye aye, sir," the helmsman admitted reluctantly. He turned to the task of plotting the requested course.

Spock, who had listened to this exchange with growing concern, finally felt obliged to at least say something cautionary. He wasn't normally in the habit of raising

objections to any of Kirk's decisions, no matter how strange they sounded at first, because they always seemed to have a way of turning out to be reasonable in the end.

But this one. Spock made a last check of his console. The readings confirmed his suspicions.

"Captain, extreme long-range sensors hint at something within the neutral zone that lies along our anticipated course. At this exaggerated distance it is impossible to determine what it is. It might be another interstellar merchant ship like Winston's. It might also be a Romulan vessel. Or it might not be a ship at all. Still I do not feel it prudent to take the chance of trespassing unannounced in the neutral zone."

"Mr. Spock," replied Winston/Kirk, "I've spoken with Winston about this at some length already. He has assured me that it is absolutely vital to get to Rator III in the shortest possible time. The survival of an entire planetary population may depend on it. Unfortunately, this necessitates our crossing through an arm of the neutral zone."

"An admirable mission, Captain," Spock agreed. "But if we endanger our ship, we will be of no use to the people on Rator III."

"We won't be of any use to them if we don't get there in time, either, Mr. Spock. I wouldn't have ordered it if I didn't feel it was safe to proceed. Winston said his sensors detected no sign of Romulans when he was passing through the zone, before his ship was disabled. I'm satisfied he was telling the truth. And his word is considered good, isn't it?"

Spock hesitated a split second. "That has been his reputation, Captain."

"Course laid in, sir," Sulu noted.

"Execute," ordered Winston/Kirk. Sulu leaned forward and adjusted controls.

"Proceeding."

They felt no sense of motion-change. Space was too vast for inbuilt human senses to detect a switch in direction at warp-speeds. But the great starship gradually began to veer from the line it had been following and to turn in a broad curve that would take it into the neutral zone.

Sulu needed only a few moments to double-check his readings.

"We're on course, sir."

"Very good, Mr. Sulu. Notify me if anything unusual should develop." He rose and moved towards the elevator. "I'm going back to my cabin. You have the conn again, Mr. Spock."

Spock eyed the captain closely as the latter exited the bridge.

Time passed. Nothing happened to disturb ship routine, which was perfectly all right with Spock. After some hard thinking, he finally thumbed the switch activating the ship's log and spoke softly into the pickup grid.

"Ship's log, stardate 5402.7. First Officer Spock recording.

"The captain's recent course change has taken us deep into the Romulan Neutral Zone. This change was apparently initiated on the request of our new passenger, Carter Winston. Information so far provided by Winston has proved accurate. We have detected no Romulan ships or, for that matter, other vessels of any kind.

"Nevertheless, I have ordered all sensors kept on long-range scan and a close watch on any object engendering suspicion at the limits of scanner range. I have also . . ."

Dizzy, he was still dizzy.

Kirk winced and sat up suddenly in bed. Two things struck him right away. First of all, he hadn't had that much to drink. And eggnog had never, never had that kind of effect on him. He'd imbibed a lot of liquids quite a sight stronger than the holiday punch, which was pablum by comparison. None of them had ever hit him like *this*!

And besides that—

He glanced over at the chronometer set into the wall above his bed. Uh-uh, something was wrong with that, too. What had happened?

Think back. Sometimes it was better to voice confusing thoughts in the presence of others. *He* couldn't figure out what had happened to him. Maybe someone else could.

Kirk strode purposefully onto the bridge. Though he was feeling terribly confused, there was no point in letting anyone else know it, just yet.

"I'll take the conn, Mr. Spock." Spock lifted an eyebrow slightly but moved away without comment. Sulu also glanced back at him curiously.

Kirk sat back in the seat, relaxed, and tried very hard to remember. Introspection produced nothing, but a casual glance forward turned up an interesting node of information indeed.

His gaze touched on the big chronometer on the navigation console, the one that set ship-time for the rest of the *Enterprise*. It read 1405.

There was nothing world smashing in that. However, he distinctly remembered the time on his wall chronometer as he was leaving his cabin. 1404, it said. And when he'd been searching his desk for a certain cassette before—before falling asleep—he'd happened to notice the time on the desk timepiece.

It had read 1400.

Not shockingly significant, perhaps, but—

Spock, who'd been watching Kirk indirectly ever since the other had returned to the bridge, noticed Kirk's confusion.

"Is something wrong, Captain?"

"I'm not . . . I'm not sure, Spock."

"Do you feel all right, sir?" This from an alarmed Sulu.

"Fine, Mr. Sulu, just fine. But am I?" He turned to Spock, mumbled half to himself, "I'd gone back to my quarters to dictate the rest of the rescue report . . . I remember that much. And I seem . . . to have fallen asleep. But the odd thing is, Mr. Spock, I can't recall moving from my desk to the bed. And I can't ever remember falling asleep so quickly—and so soundly—for just a few minutes.

"If I was as tired as all that, it seems I ought to have slept an hour or so."

"Possibly you needed the rest more than you think, Captain," suggested Spock, having no conclusions yet to jump to. "The body has its own system of checks and balances in that regard. You obviously required only the briefest of naps.

"In any case, nothing has changed since you left. We're still on course through the neutral zone to Rator III."

"But I don't remember going to—" Kirk stopped, looked at Spock in sudden amazement as his last words penetrated. "The Romulan Neutral Zone?"

"It is the only neutral zone we were near, Captain," the first officer replied with gentle irony.

"I gave no authorization to enter it, Mr. Spock. Did you order a course change?"

"No, sir," Spock replied, now equally confused. "You did."

"Ridiculous!" Kirk's mind was spinning. First a highly unnatural nap, and now Spock seemed to have gone crazy. Or maybe he was still asleep and this was all a bad dream.

If so, it was long past time for him to wake up.

"No one in Starfleet would issue such an order unless it was a matter of life and death, Spock."

"I believe that was the rationale you employed, Captain." He turned and moved a toggle switch on the instrument panel above his head. There was a small screen set into the panel. Both he and Kirk stared at it.

The screen came to life, and the scene that had taken place on the bridge only moments before was repeated.

"Weren't you going to your cabin, sir?" intoned a recorded Sulu as Kirk watched incredulously.

"I've already been there, Mr. Sulu . . . set a direct course for Rator III."

"Through the Romulan Neutral Zone, sir?"

"That was an order, Helmsman."

Kirk turned away from the damning screen. He'd had enough. More than enough. "That will do, Spock." Spock obligingly shut off the recording and swiveled to face his captain.

Kirk leaned back in the chair, very thoughtful. A number of explanations suggested themselves. As he examined each one and moved on to the next, they grew progressively outrageous and less and less realistic.

One thing he did know, though. Until this was all worked out and a reasonable explanation *did* suggest itself, he had to

get off the bridge.

"Mr. Sulu, locate Mr. Scott and have him report to the bridge to take command, please." He rose and headed towards the exit. Spock moved to accompany him.

"Also, Mr. Sulu," he said back over his shoulder, "plot a course to take the *Enterprise* out of the neutral zone at warp-six. Lt. M'ress, put the ship on yellow alert."

"Cerrtainly, Captain," acknowledged the concerned lieutenant.

"Yellow alert, sir?" wondered Spock as the doors joined behind them.

"I think it's necessary, Spock, until I can get a handle on this situation. I don't feel in a position to take any chances . . . with whatever's going on here. Surely by now you've noticed that both my actions and my orders of the past hour have been, well, contradictory."

"I confess that something of the sort had occurred to me, Captain. But the reasons why—"

"Mr. Spock," Kirk's voice was grim, "I don't remember giving those orders to enter the neutral zone. I left the bridge, went to my cabin, fell asleep for a few moments, and returned to the bridge. That's all."

As usual, Spock's logic took precedence over tact, though Kirk didn't notice. He wanted answers, not sympathy. Too many vital things were at stake.

"Perhaps it would be a good idea to have Dr. McCoy examine you, Captain?"

"I agree absolutely. If I've become subject to mental blackouts, let alone physical ones, during which I give dangerous orders, then I've become a danger to the ship. I can't begin to imagine what's happened to me, but I can't take chances with a possibility like that."

He hit a switch, and the elevator lights shifted from vertical to horizontal. They were now moving down the length of the *Enterprise*.

It still didn't add up.

The instruments themselves continued to check out, efficiency bordered on a hundred percent, and yet they persisted in coughing up the same ridiculous readings. McCoy muttered to himself, bent for the umpteenth time to try to correlate the numbers on the scanner with those in a printed table of fine print glowing on a small readout screen.

The door chimed and he didn't look back. The figure of Carter Winston walked into the examination room. It watched patiently as McCoy continued matching figures that didn't match the way they were supposed to. Eventually McCoy glanced irritably to see who had entered. When he recognized Winston, he smiled a quick greeting before returning to his work.

"Hello, Winston," he said while running a new set of figures across the screen. "Still trying to figure this out. Sometimes I wonder if I shouldn't have taken more Instrumentation in med school."

So intent was McCoy on his study that he failed to notice the transformation behind him—a transformation that would have confused his instruments a good deal more.

He didn't see Winston place his arms over his chest, didn't see him dissolve like instant pudding and become a strange alien apparition, one that glided across the smooth floor on thick appendages with the grace of a ballerina.

"Winston, I've been over your tests two dozen times, and I don't think—" A tentacle rose, touched the back of McCoy's neck. The doctor slumped in his seat.

The alien thing caught him easily and carried him into the adjoining laboratory. As it placed the doctor on the floor, the sound of the examination-room door could be heard operating.

Anne Nored peered into the deserted room. "Dr. McCoy?" She took a step inside and the door automatically closed behind her. "Dr. McCoy?"

In the lab, the creature made motions with its tentacles. Seconds later a duplicate Dr. McCoy was standing over the limp form of the original. Anne Nored walked over to McCoy's workbench. She idly examined the scanner and the other devices McCoy had been pouring over without touching any of

them. There was a slight shuffling sound and she jerked to her right.

"Dr. McCoy, you startled me."

Winston/McCoy stepped out of the lab, making sure the door closed behind him. "Nothing startles you, Anne, you're a security officer, and one of the best. Can I help you?"

"Oh, all right, so I was role playing." She smiled, but it faded quickly to an expression of awkwardness. "I thought this might be easy, doctor, but it's not. I don't know if you can . . . I just thought . . . well, I have to talk to somebody. And the other gals," she smiled a little again, "have a tendency to be less than serious about such things. I'd like to laugh at it, too, but I can't. It hurts too much. So I thought maybe you . . .?"

Winston/McCoy seemed to hesitate, then gestured to a chair. Anne sat down gratefully. When she didn't seem able to continue, Winston/McCoy spoke.

"Let me guess. It's about you and Carter Winston." He paused for a moment, added, "He told me a little about it when I was examining him."

"How much is 'a little,' doctor?" Again Winston/McCoy appeared to pause.

"Enough."

"Doctor, what am I going to do?" she finally blurted desperately. "I know you're not a psychiatrist, and I don't think I need that. I'm not mentally unbalanced. I don't think, but I still love him." The corners of her mouth twisted upwards a little.

"Come to think of it, love is classified by some as a state of temporary mental imbalance, isn't it?"

"Only by poets, writers of romantic fiction, and the French," Winston/McCoy replied. He turned and focused his attention on the blank wall opposite.

"I'm sure he'd like to feel the same way about you, Anne. He also told me something of the times you two had together, of the experiences you shared. Not a great deal, but I think I can understand the depth of feeling you had for each other.

"But it all may be impossible to recapture, Anne. Five years can be forever to someone. People change. People in love

more frequently than most. And one thing I can tell you with assurance—Carter Winston's been through changes no other human being ever experienced." His voice dropped and he murmured, "Yes, people change."

"Well, I haven't!" she finally shouted. "What am I supposed to do? What *can* I do?"

"If he asked you to forget him," said Winston/McCoy, "I think you should try to do just that. Or would you prefer that he lie to you, tell you what you want to hear, intentionally deceive you. Do you want him to do that?"

"Oh, no. He's the gentlest, most thoughtful man I've ever known. Ever will know. And I don't think he could carry it off very well. Lying's not in his nature."

"Well, then, you see?" Winston/McCoy insisted. "If he doesn't want you any longer, for whatever reasons, and he's asked you to forget him, then all I can do is suggest that you take that as an honest concern for you and do it."

"You have no knowledge of what he's been through, of what—" and Winston/McCoy half smiled,—"unusual changes may have taken place in the years he's been gone. As a physician I can only advise you . . . and also as a friend. Forget Winston."

"Forget Carter—" The words came without any force, any conviction behind them. She seemed ready to argue further, but the door chimed. Kirk and Spock entered. It was hard enough to articulate such intimate feelings in front of the ship's doctor. It would be impossible in front of the ship's captain and first officer.

So instead of continuing, she stood. "Thank you, Doctor McCoy. I'll consider your advice."

"Do that, Anne . . . Lieutenant Nored."

Kirk studied the security officer as she left, then turned to Winston/McCoy. The doctor smiled pleasantly.

"What can I do for you, Jim?"

"Bones, I need a complete medical examination."

"On Carter Winston? But I've already—" Kirk waved him off impatiently.

"No, no. For myself. Something's just happened that—" He stopped. The figure of Winston/McCoy had abruptly turned

away from him and was now engaged in studying a microtape index file mounted on the far wall.

"I'm afraid I'll have to make it later in the day, Captain. I have too many tests to process right now."

Kirk had too many thoughts whirling through his head to react to that, but Spock looked puzzled. Being the favorite target of McCoy's brash wit, maybe he was more sensitive to the doctor's moods—or changes in personality.

"Carter Winston's, for example?" Spock inquired. Winston/McCoy half-turned, but didn't look at them.

"No, that one's done, completed. No trouble at all, Mr. Spock. Standard tests run, checked out completely normal."

"Are you sure there's no possibility you made an error?" persisted Spock.

Now it was Kirk's turn to look questioningly at his first officer instead of vice versa. It wasn't like Spock to question another officer's work—especially McCoy's. But it would be like McCoy—almost required of him—to respond with some especially devastating remark.

Instead, the doctor only chuckled. "Well, there's always that chance. I'll go over them again, if you like."

"No, that won't be necessary, Bones. I'll drop by later for that examination, when you're not so busy. Let's go, Spock." Kirk turned and started for the door.

When it was securely shut behind them and they were out in the empty reception room, both men stopped and exchanged uncertain looks.

"Captain, did you notice Dr. McCoy's reaction when I asked him if there was a possibility he might have made an error in Carter Winston's tests?"

Kirk nodded.

"Yes. He didn't jump all over you when you questioned his accuracy. That isn't normal."

"Excuse me, Captain—'jump all over me?' "

"Said something along the lines of, 'there's as much chance of that as my falling down with . . .' "

" 'hysterical laughter at a joke of mine,' " finished Spock.

"Yes, that's it. What's even less normal is that he agreed with you. He conceded the chance, and that's not like Bones at all. If there's anything he's supremely confident about, it's his own competence as a physician. Come to think of it, it was also not like him to put off my request for a physical."

"I quite agree, Captain. Which means—"

"I don't know what it means," Kirk muttered, "except that maybe there are two officers on this ship who need medical checks. Come on!"

They burst into the Sick-Bay examination chamber and were dumbfounded at what they saw. Or rather, at what they didn't see.

The room was empty.

Neither officer feeling particularly bright at that moment, they moved to make a thorough search of the room.

"There is only one entrance to these inner medical rooms," mused Spock thoughtfully. "For security reasons, and for quarantine purposes. There are not a great many places a man could hide."

"No," agreed Kirk, "and I think—"

"Ohhhh . . ."

Kirk and Spock were at the entrance to the nearby lab in seconds. Both men were wary, expecting—they weren't sure what—to come charging pell-mell out at them. But the door slid back normally at Kirk's touch and nothing barred their entrance.

McCoy was sitting up in the middle of the floor, rubbing the side of his head. He looked very much as if he'd just absorbed a substantial dose of something a good deal stronger than eggnog.

"Bones?"

McCoy didn't react at first. Then he looked up at them, still dazed.

"Must have . . . must have fallen asleep . . . somehow, I guess. A little nap—"

"A little nap," echoed Kirk, reflecting on the similarity of a recent experience. "I think I have an idea what you mean, Bones."

"Doctor, you are a man of curious habits," observed Spock, "but I have never known you to nap on the laboratory floor. Elementary logic dictates that even an examination table would be far more comfortable, as well as—" He paused in midsentence at Kirk's raised hand. The captain was staring intently around the inner laboratory.

Ever since they'd entered he had not felt quite right about something. And not because of what they half expected to find—without knowing what it was. No, it was a feeling he still couldn't pin down. Spock would say it was illogical, but damn it, he felt *something* was wrong!

"Something is not right with this room."

McCoy made a rapid examination of his laboratory. His gaze returned eventually to Kirk's uncertain face.

"Everything looks okay to me, Jim."

"No," Kirk objected hurriedly. "Take a moment and think about it, Bones." Before McCoy could comment, the captain moved quickly to shut the door behind them.

"Both of you, study the room. There's definitely something different from the last time I was in here. I can't put my finger on it yet, but—"

The three officers started a patient, methodical survey of the laboratory. There didn't seem to be a great deal that might conceal some startling revelation. It didn't help that they had no idea what to look for, Kirk included.

Desks, wall decorations, shelves full of vials and tubes and neatly racked instruments, the gleaming surgical cases, emergency power chargers for use in case of shipboard power failure, the big portable sterilizer, three examination tables . . .

Even an examination table would be far more comfortable, Spock had said.

Kirk smiled then. "All right, Winston, you can come out now." Both Spock and McCoy turned their attention to the captain, Spock interestedly, McCoy incredulously.

Kirk walked forward until he was standing directly in front of the examination table farthest to the left. He spoke not behind it nor under it, but to it.

"I suggest you show yourself, Winston, or whatever you are. The masquerade's over."

Making no sense of the scene and getting no elucidation from Kirk, McCoy slowly got to his feet and whispered to Spock.

"Did you say that *I'm* a man of curious habits, Spock? Jim's talking to a table!"

"I don't think so, Doctor." An idea was beginning to solidify in the first officer's mind as he added certain known factors and proceeded toward a result. Evidently Kirk had already gotten there.

The captain stepped back from the table and turned his attention to one of the nearby wall shelves. Kirk spoke to the others as he studied the labels on the neat rows of crystal vials.

"There used to be only two examination tables in this room, as I recall, Bones." He focused his attention on the top row of containers. "Now there seem to be three."

Spock said nothing, but McCoy suddenly found himself nodding in agreement. "I just realized that too, Jim. But even so, what—" McCoy shut up. Whatever was happening here ought to come to a head pretty soon.

Kirk finally selected one of the smaller vials from the shelf. He walked back to stand next to the table.

The vial in his hand was made of thick, heat-formed artificial quartz alloyed with certain other metallic and ceramic components. It contained a small amount of thin purple fluid. When McCoy saw which vial the captain had removed he started forward, then stopped.

Again, Kirk directed his comments to the table. The flat, unmistakably inorganic surface gleamed brightly in the overhead lights, small wheels and dials sparkling with polish. McCoy studied it till his eyes hurt, looking for some hidden sign he might have missed that would reveal the table's mysterious secrets to him.

It looked like an examination table. Kirk tapped it with one finger, and there was a faint ping.

It sounded like an examination table.

By Andromeda, it *was* an examination table!

"This is a vial of orientine acid," Kirk informed the table solemnly. "It will burn through just about anything but this

holding crystal. If you've never seen it work, I'll be happy to demonstrate." He patted the table again. "On you."

There was a reasonable pause. Then Kirk raised the vial over the table and moved his thumb toward the cap release set into one side. The table shimmered suddenly, the sort of eye-tricking flutter of things seen out of one's corner of vision that aren't there anymore when you turn to look at them. The table rippled dreamily and changed form.

A moment later it was no longer an examination table. In its place stood a tall creature of thick, cabled limbs and shining eye lenses that stared back at them unwinkingly.

"I saw that," said a gaping McCoy, "but I don't believe it."

"A Vendorian, Doctor," Spock informed him. "Their planet is quarantined, and few people ever see them. Their ability to rearrange their molecular structure at will to resemble anything of the same approximate mass—and their practice of deceit as a way of life—places them very much off-limits to others."

"Their unusual abilities could be of considerable value to the Federation, or to others. But as desirable as their physical attributes might be, psychologically they are still unfit for participation in a community of worlds.

"Mr. Spock, get a security team down here on the double."

"Yes, Captain." Spock turned to leave. As he did so McCoy moved to get out of his way. Those few steps were all that was necessary to bring him within reach of the Vendorian.

Powerful tentacles snapped out and enveloped the doctor in a constricting grasp.

"Jim!"

Kirk and Spock moved as one toward the Vendorian. Unraveling the clutching limbs, the alien sent McCoy spinning and stumbling into the other two officers. All three fell to the floor.

Moving with surprising agility for such an awkward-looking creature, the Vendorian dashed past them. Spock managed to roll over in time to make a grab at the fleeing alien. All he got was a handful of something that felt like snakeskin without the scales. He couldn't hold it. A second later it was out the doorway and long gone.

Kirk was on his feet, racing for the exit. Spock made a move as if to follow, instead changed direction and went directly to the wall communicator.

"Spock to bridge—put me on the ship's intercom, Lieutenant." And then, seconds later, "All security teams, intruder alert! All security teams, repeat, intruder alert—"

Kirk was out in the hall. He looked to his right, then left, just in time to catch a last glimpse of the Vendorian turning down an intersecting corridor. A security team raced around the far end of the hallway facing him a second later. Spock's voice sounded loud, replayed over every speaker in the starship.

"Intruder is a Vendorian, capable of assuming any shape or form of the same approximate mass . . ."

III

A Jeffries tube loomed nearby. The Vendorian, using its ability to look in all directions at once, satisfied itself that no pursuer was in sight. Then it clambered into the tube.

Moving like a big orange spider, it made its way up the channeled interior. Footsteps sounded below—far away now, muffled with increasing distance—as Kirk and the security team raced through the corridor below.

Near the top, the alien paused and crossed upper tentacles. Once more it shifted to the shape of Carter Winston. A few more centimeters, a careful look both ways, and then he scrambled out of the tube onto a new deck, setting the tube cover back into place.

There were drawbacks as well as advantages to assuming human shape. For one thing, he could no longer see in all directions. So he didn't see Anne Nored until he rounded a corner and nearly ran her down. She staggered and, reflexively, it seemed, he caught her to keep her from falling.

But this time, instead of moving into his arms, she pushed away and brought up her security phaser. It centered squarely on his chest.

Affecting an air of mild surprise he looked first at the phaser, then up at her.

"Anne, what are you doing?"

"My job," she replied tightly. "It isn't hard to guess who the intruder is. You're the only stranger aboard, Carter. Or whatever you are. A . . . a Vendorian." Running footsteps sounded from somewhere behind them. She stared at him, then threw a quick, nervous look over her shoulder.

It was only an instant, but Carter Winston's reflexes were faster than human. He knocked the phaser from her hand. It skittered across the deck to bounce off the far wall. She ran to recover it. At the same time Kirk and a small group of security personnel rounded a far curve.

Anne picked up the phaser, turned and dropped to one knee, holding the phaser in both hands and balancing an elbow on her thigh. It was easy to take aim at the distant figure. She had a clear shot.

But she didn't fire. Instead, she slowly lowered the phaser to her side.

The security team pounded past in pursuit. Kirk slowed and stopped beside her.

"Lieutenant Nored, you could have stopped him . . . it. Why didn't you fire?"

She spoke slowly as she got to her feet, without looking at him. "I couldn't. I know some explanation is necessary, Captain, but—" She couldn't think of anything to say that would make her sound less of an idiot.

"I knew he had to be the intruder, but . . . I couldn't bring myself to fire!" Her voice was trembling.

"He's an alien, Lieutenant—not Carter Winston. A Vendorian. A shape-changing complex of orange tentacles topped by an inhuman brain."

"My mind tells me that, Captain, but there are other parts of me that don't convince so easily." There, she was right. She still sounded like an idiot.

"Lieutenant," and Kirk's voice was surprisingly devoid of reproach, "the man you loved no longer exists. Carter Winston is dead. He's probably been dead for years."

"I realize that, Captain. But I just—" She turned away. Words had become thoroughly inadequate. "Reason and love don't work well together."

"When you're a commander you can be profound, Lieutenant. For now—" He didn't get the chance to finish. Spock arrived, panting slightly.

"Security teams report no sign of the alien on this deck any longer, Captain."

"How do they know, Mr. Spock?" Kirk sighed. "I was afraid of this. Once out of sight, he can turn into anyone or anything on board this ship. I wonder why he chose to re-form as Carter Winston, instead of as Dr. McCoy or myself?"

"I cannot guess, Captain. I can only surmise that this constant shape changing is not as easy for him as it appears

to be to us. He really requires a form capable of mobility now—an examination table or section of wall will no longer do, for example. Perhaps changing into a familiar shape is simpler and less tiring. He is obviously well acquainted with the shape of Carter Winston."

"As a matter of fact," Kirk began, then paused, grinning sardonically. Spock watched him patiently.

"You can at least share the idea with me, Captain, if not the actual humor."

"Oh, nothing, Spock. For a minute it occurred to me . . . I thought—" and he grinned wider, "I thought that you might be the Vendorian now." Spock did not smile, which was hardly a surprise.

"What makes you think I'm not, Captain?" Both eyebrows moved ceilingward. Kirk stopped chuckling, gave Spock a uncertain glance before grinning again.

"The Vendorian can change his shape, but not certain other things. I think I'll take a chance on your being you, Spock."

"That is most considerate of you, Captain. We find ourselves in complete agreement on who I am. The question remains," and he paused for effect, "are you who you claim to be?"

"I was with Lieutenant Nored while the alien was still present," Kirk claimed indignantly. "It's a definite problem, all right. If we're not careful he'll have us shooting at each other. But given time, we'll find him. It's only one problem."

Somewhere in space exists a formless, malignant entity who listens to the words of starship captains merely for the chance of playing their plans false. Said entity must have been listening to Kirk, for, as if on cue, the red-alert signal now commenced its visual and aural clamoring. A blinker just above them flashed insistently for attention.

Various crew members began to appear, running towards their battle stations. As any well-drilled crew should, they ignored their two senior officers in single-minded pursuit of current objectives—namely, getting to where they belonged as fast as was humanly or inhumanly possible.

"Now what?" Kirk's question was more resigned than hopeful. He moved to the flashing wall communications

hookup.

"Hello, bridge? This is the captain speaking. Scotty? What's happening up there? What's the Vendorian up to now?"

"It's not the Vendorian, Captain," the chief engineer replied. "I wish it were. A pair of Romulan battle cruisers, sir, and if they're not on an intercept course we're about to witness the biggest cosmic coincidence since that double star in M-31 went nova together."

"All right, Scotty, keep a lid on things. We'll be right up."

"What was that you just said about dealing with only one problem, Captain?"

"Spock, if I didn't know that you weren't prone to malicious sarcasm, I'd . . . ahhh, never mind."

By the time they'd regained the bridge and Kirk had resumed his seat in the commander's chair and Spock his own at the library computer, the two Romulans were close enough for visual contact via the telescopic eyes of the main viewscreen

If there were any chance they might have been Federation ships, that hope was soon laid to rest at the sight of their distinctive silhouettes. In design and basic construction they were similar to the battle cruisers of the Klingon Empire. Insignia and certain minor but unmistakable differences branded them as Romulan.

Kirk's first thought was to get something down on record. Not only in case hostilities ensued, but also because such information would be needed for any legal actions that might arise out of this encounter. So he quickly activated the log.

He was about to begin the entry when a sudden thought struck him. No, not yet. It was too early to plan for pessimistic eventualities. He flicked off the official log, switched on the general recorder instead.

"Mr. Scott, any chance of us outrunning them?"

"Not now, sir," worried Scott, shaking his head once. "They were right on top of us, Captain, before our sensors even picked 'em up."

"It was as if they were waiting for us, Captain," Sulu added.

"Ummmm." Now he directed his voice and attention to the pick-up grid. "Due to interference by the Vendorian recently

discovered on board in the guise of Carter Winston, the *Enterprise* has been detected by ships of the Romulan Empire while violating the Romulan Neutral Zone. By the terms of our treaty, the units of the Romulan fleet have a legal right to seize the *Enterprise*. To complicate matters, we have as yet been unable to apprehend the Vendorian responsible for this situation."

Given the laws against harming intelligent neutrals Kirk naturally didn't add his attendant thoughts—namely, that if and when they did find the troublemaking shape-changer, he'd take great pleasure in tying its seven body tentacles in knots and then opening them again . . . with a meat cleaver.

But right now he had a more difficult situation to focus his attention on.

"We're being scanned, Captain," came Uhura's voice. "And I'm picking up a communications beam. They're attempting to contact us." She hesitated. "Shall I throw up an interference screen, sir?" Kirk thought quickly.

"No point in trying to stall them, Lieutenant. I've got a hunch this particular bunch won't stall." He smiled grimly. "Let's hear what they've got to say. If there's visual with it, put it on the screen. I'd like to see who I'm dealing with . . . and if my face does them any good, they're welcome to it."

Visual there was.

When his humanoid image finally cleared on the main viewscreen the relaxed attitude of the Romulan commander only confirmed the suspicions taking root in Kirk's mind.

"You appear to have a propensity for trespassing in the neutral zone, Captain Kirk. I've been told it has happened once or twice before."

My, but wasn't he a smug one, Kirk thought. What Kirk said was different, however, smoothly conciliatory. That was the best attitude Kirk could fake; he couldn't quite bring himself to be deferential toward this oily character.

"It was not deliberate, I assure you."

The Romulan commander's reply was dry. "It never is. But the terms of the treaty are clear. They make no provisions for good intentions. I'd like to indulge in the sentiment your people are so fond of and ignore the treaty this time, but, of

course, any attempt to contravene the articles, even for friendship's sake, could mean war.

"Surrender your ship, Captain. You will be well treated. We will release you and your crew at the nearest Federation outpost bordering the neutral zone."

Kirk thought furiously, considering. "I have your personal word of honor on that, Commander? . . ."

"Larus—Commander Larus. I swear by my family and my command, Captain. You and your personnel need have no worries." He tried hard not to gloat. "I have no personal quarrel with you. I must take your ship only to comply with the terms of the treaty between our two governments. I take no personal pleasure in this distasteful deed whatsoever."

I'll just bet you don't, you grinning so and so, Kirk silently cursed. His return smile, however, was equally pleasant.

"I'd like a few minutes to inform my crew. There will be certain preparations required."

"Of course, Captain Kirk. I understand perfectly. The shock, and all. Take all the time you need—up to five minutes your ship-time, no more." Abruptly, the screen blanked.

"Transmission ended, Captain," Uhura informed him; "But they're still scanning us."

"Fine. Let 'em scan us till their scanning computers get an electronic migraine." Kirk turned and activated a switch on the right armrest. Spock left his station and moved to stand next to the captain.

"Kirk to security. What's the status on the search for the Vendorian?"

"Nored here, sir." The voice of the lieutenant was calm and professional now, no sign of emotional upset. Good. "No progress yet. We have all decks under constant patrol. No one has seen it, but—"

"How do you know, Lieutenant?" snapped a frustrated Kirk. "Anyone might have walked right past the Vendorian a dozen times without seeing it."

"I don't think so, Captain." Nored's response was firm, confident. "Our patrols have their phasers set on low-power stun. I've given orders that they're to randomly beam everything they pass—walls, ceilings, fixtures—without design

or selectivity. We'll end up with a lot of scorched paint, but I think the Vendorian will think twice before he considers staying in one disguise very long.

"And the patrols are traveling in tight groups, guarding one another. So I don't think there's much chance of him turning into one of our own people. At least the alien will be too busy changing shapes to cause any more trouble."

Kirk found himself in agreement with Nored's precautions. It ought to flush the alien out in the open. "Carry on, Lieutenant." He broke the connection and nodded toward the viewscreen where the Romulan ships were displayed again.

"As Scotty points out, Mr. Spock, this meeting is hardly a coincidence. The Romulans were expecting us from the first. The wreck of Winston's ship—I wonder what *did* happen to him—was used to slip a saboteur and spy on board. And what better spy than a shape-changing Vendorian who can become at will any of the spied-upon?

"When I went to my cabin he put me out long enough to take my shape. Then *he* came to the bridge and ordered the course change. By the time I recovered, well," he shrugged, "it was too late to swing free of the zone. A neat trap."

"It would seem so, Captain. Yet one thing continues to puzzle me."

"Spock?"

"How is it that the Romulans are able to persuade a Vendorian to work for them? I cannot think of a logical reason why one of the shape-changers should. I cannot imagine what inducement the Romulans could offer."

"We'll consider the question of motivation later, Mr. Spock. Right now we've got a starship to save." He looked to the helm. "Open a hailing frequency, Lt. M'ress. Uhura, you keep listening for more of the same from our friends out there. And keep monitoring their scans."

The feline navigation officer moved to obey, her tail flicking in nervous response. "I have contact, Captain," she purred. "Hailing frrequency was harrdly necessarry. They've been waiting forr us to rrespond, it seems."

Once again the view of the paired Romulan cruisers was replaced by a portrait of their commander. He was making a

strong attempt, Kirk noted, to suppress his normal arrogance.

"Your time is up, Captain. I assume you are now prepared to turn your ship over to me."

"Wrong assumption, Commander."

"Captain," protested the Romulan indignantly, "you are outnumbered, outgunned, and legally in the wrong. I admire your courage, but permit me to say that you err in your tactical evaluation of the present situation."

"I have no choice, Commander," Kirk shot back. "If I were an innocent violator of neutral space that would lead to some discussion, yes. But the treaty also states that deception of any kind—false beacons, signals, anything—used to lure a vessel into the neutral zone are a provocation by the luring side and not by the intruder. It is you who are in violation of the treaty, not I."

"Lured, Captain?" protested the Romulan with admirable outrage. "How could we possibly *lure* a starfleet vessel so deeply into the neutral zone?"

"Through the use of a spy masquerading as a dead human named Carter Winston."

The Romulan commander paused before giving a sad shake of the head. "A shape-changing spy? Come now, Captain," he pleaded. "Your courage, it seems, is exceeded only by your imagination. Both are misdirected."

"You used a Vendorian," Kirk continued easily, "which, I might add, is also in violation of a number of treaties, not to mention a violation of the galactic quarantine of Vendoria itself."

Either the Romulan Commander decided to abandon his bluff, or else all this forced camaraderie was getting on his nerves. His natural brusqueness abruptly came to the fore.

"Your five minutes are long since up, Captain. Either surrender your ship or prepare to fight."

"I will not surrender my ship," Kirk replied, spacing the words deliberately.

So they were going to fight, mused Chief Engineer Scott.

He had left the bridge after the red-alert signal and gone to his battle station back in engineering. Well, they'd had trouble with the Romulans before and had come out okay. Even though they were outnumbered this time, he wasn't especially worried. Why, they'd give—

He paused at the top of the spiral ladder. Just in front of him, away from the ladder exit, a crewman was working in front of an open panel. The panel shouldn't have been open. And no one, but no one, should have been working at those relays without Scott's personal permission.

"Hey! What d'you think you're doin'?" The crewman turned quickly.

"Why, nothing, Chief." He walked over to the ladder exit and helped Scott up the last step. "Only this."

He touched Scott's shoulder with a hand. Moving rapidly, he managed to catch the slumping form of the chief engineer before it could slide back down the ladder. Pulling him gently out of the spiral he laid the limp body out on the deck. The crewman rose, again studying the open panel.

Someone else might come and he was in a hurry. Might as well revert to self. The extra limbs would make the job go faster. He crossed his arms, and blurred.

Using only a pair of tentacles for support, the Vendorian used the other five to tear at the thick cables running behind the open panel . . .

The first red light appeared on Sulu's console.

"Captain," he shouted as he worked frantically at the controls beneath the warning flash, "our deflector shields are coming down!"

Kirk cursed silently, pressed a switch on the chair. "Kirk to engineering. Bridge to engineering! Scotty, what's happening back there? Our shields are fading!"

In the main engineering room a tall subengineer rushed to the chattering intercom and acknowledged the call breathlessly.

"H . . . here, sir."

"Not very well you don't. Who is this?" Kirk demanded. "Who's talking?"

"Second Engineer Gabler, sir . . . Captain." Kirk glanced back at Spock. This was no time for disciplinary action. "Get those shields up again, Gabler—now!"

"I can't, sir!" yelled the other helplessly.

"Well then, rouse Mr. Scott from his nap and have him do it!" Now the response from the other end was one of complete confusion.

"I was just going to ask to speak to him, sir. Isn't he up forward with you?"

"No, he is not up forward with me, Mister. You know the chiefs battle station is back there."

"Yes, sir. But he isn't anywhere around, sir."

"Well, then—!" Kirk paused and counted to six, spoke more quietly. "All right, Mr. Gabler. It is vital that we have our shields back as soon as possible. Do the best you can."

"Aye, sir." Gabler switched off, looked around at the small cluster of engineers and technicians who'd gathered around the intercom station.

"Don't just stand there gaping like idiots! The deflector shields have dropped. Check your telltales, trace the leads, find the trouble spot!"

Immediately the group hurried to their positions. Gabler ran to his, too, but his mind wasn't on the technical problem at hand.

What had happened to the chief?

Meanwhile a telltale of a different kind was flashing on Sulu's console. "Shuttle-bay doors are functioning, sir. The Vendorian must be trying to escape."

"We still have some control over this ship," Kirk muttered through clenched teeth. "Shut those doors, and lock all entrances to the shuttle bay."

Sulu tried one switch, frowned.

"No response, sir."

"Emergency override, Mr. Sulu," came Spock's quiet voice. "Mechanism voluntary jam to prevent air loss." He glanced at Kirk as Sulu hurried to obey. "We will not be able to operate

the shuttle doors until the stripped relays and gears are replaced, Captain."

Kirk hardly heard him. The same idea had occurred to him seconds after Spock had given the order.

"Doors closing, sir!" reported Sulu excitedly. That was the signal for Kirk to jump from his chair.

"One problem down. Spock, take command. Talk to the Romulans. Stall them. Tell them anything. Tell them we're going to agree, but that I'm desperately thinking of a way to save face—their commander should understand that.

"Uhura, send a security team to the shuttle deck, but don't open the doors yet. We've got the Vendorian trapped, that's enough for now. I'll be back in engineering. I've got to find out what the devil's happening back there."

As he hurried rapidly toward the heart of the starship, Kirk pondered their chances. The shields hadn't fallen all the way, but the *Enterprise*'s defenses had been badly weakened. Even with all shields up and operating at full strength, the *Enterprise* versus two Romulan battle cruisers wasn't exactly a mop-up operation.

Now, with their shield strength down at least fifty percent, well—

At least, he mused with savage satisfaction, they'd prevented the escape of the Vendorian spy. Spock's query came back to him. He, too, wondered how the Romulans had managed to convince the shape-changer to do the dirty work for them. From what little he knew of Vendorian civilization, the alliance made no sense.

After what seemed like hours, he finally reached the main engineering bay. In response to his questions, a harried technician directed him up to another deck. A short climb and he emerged in the middle of another, larger group of milling crew members. One directed him forward. He found Gabler and Scott hunched over an open panel.

"What happened, Scotty?"

"Hello, sir. I'm sure I don't know. I came up here to battle-check the backup deflector-shield relays." His voice took on a tone of puzzled outrage. "And here was this common tech, calm as you please, taking the connections to pieces!

"Now, the sight of me in such a situation ought to have frozen the good man solid to the deck—workin' unauthorized with such equipment. Instead, he just smiled confident as you please and came over to help me on deck. That's all I remember."

"He couldn't have been at it long, sir," put in Gabler. "We found the chief right after I talked to you."

"He was at it long enough," growled Scotty. The chief's attitude did not inspire feelings of confidence in Kirk.

"How long will it take to fix, Scotty?"

"At least two hours, Captain."

Two *hours*!

"Well, get on it. That's all." Kirk turned and left. He knew better than to make melodramatic pronouncements. If Scott said it would take two hours, it would do no good for Kirk to say, "Do it in one!" The chief engineer's time estimates were as reliable as his work. Two hours then, working at top speed, and he'd have his shields back.

But could they possibly stall the Romulans for two hours, when the Romulan commander had given him five minutes, and those reluctantly? They might not have two seconds left.

They had one bargaining chip left, just one—and that was the *Enterprise* herself.

Already the Romulan commander had admitted that his only interest was in the starship—intact and in working order. If the Romulan's sensors were worth a handful of components, they'd know by now that the *Enterprise*'s shields had been severely weakened. Kirk didn't think they'd hold off forcing a decision in order to give their Vendorian a chance to escape. If he got away, all well and good . . . a bonus. If not, he had served his purpose.

However, they *would* hesitate before destroying the prize they'd worked so hard to snare. How long the vision of the *Enterprise* as a captured ship would keep the Romulan commander's natural belligerence in check Kirk didn't know, and that was the crucial factor.

A destroyed *Enterprise* would be a small blow to Federation strength compared to a fully operational captured one—but a blow nonetheless.

Kirk had no choice. He'd have to take the chance the Romulans wanted the starship badly enough to hold off firing on her. Nerves and not phasers would decide the outcome of this confrontation.

He smiled and felt a little better.

There were worse things to bet on than the avarice of a Romulan . . .

IV

A single shuttle craft was lined up facing the *Enterprise*'s bay doors. Those doors wouldn't open now until a number of highly trained people had replaced certain stripped bearings and other deliberately ruined parts.

Three security guards had actually made it into the bay before the order to lock all doorways had taken effect. One of them was lying slumped across the open portway leading into the shuttle. Another lay crumpled at the foot of the ramp leading up into it.

The third stood quietly facing the other occupant of the soundless chamber.

Anne Nored kept her phaser pointed at him. The hand holding it didn't waver, didn't shake. Neither did her voice.

"You're not getting past me this time. I've learned my lesson."

The form of Carter Winston nodded slowly. "Yes, he said you were like this. Efficient, professional, as well as affectionate and beautiful. You're quite everything he said you were, Anne." The muzzle of the powerful phaser didn't dip a centimeter.

There was suspicion in her gaze, hesitancy in her voice—but she had to ask.

"Carter . . . what did he say? How . . . how do you know him so well?"

The Winston/Vendorian spoke. Despite the fact that instinct told her she should regard its every word as a clever lie, there was something in Winston's voice that . . . no, darn it, not Winston's! Only a sly mimicry, an uncanny imitation.

Reproduction or not, something in the voice sounded almost honest.

"He said many things. Some were feelings, deep feelings he could not always fully express or adequately convey. Emotions that, while I understood the words and the flat meanings of them, clearly held a good deal more than I could

comprehend. Language can sometimes be infuriatingly uncommunicative, can tease and confuse instead of enlighten.

"I tried hard to understand these feelings. So many of the ideas and concepts that he tried to convey to me were new, alien, strange—but always intriguing. The less I understood, the more I wanted to know." Winston shook his head.

"My people have their faults, but they are compounded by this peculiar ability of ours to mimic others, to change our shape. Something so natural to us seems so frighteningly strange to other intelligent beings. I understand that lower creatures on many worlds can perform similar feats. But when the ability is coupled with intelligence, other races grow nervous.

"Sometimes," he continued bitterly, "we—" His voice shifted back to a more gentle tone. "But Carter Winston truly loved you."

The phaser shifted ever so slightly, but still remained fixed on the figure in front of her. Blazes, where were the backup security personnel?

She had no way of knowing that Kirk had ordered the shuttle bay sealed off from the rest of the ship. Where was the captain, or Mr. Spock? Someone to give orders, to take this responsibility off her hands.

She ought to have said nothing to the creature, ought to have kept her mouth shut, and at least beamed it slightly in one leg to restrict its movement.

Instead, she asked softly, "How did he die?"

"Winston's ship did indeed encounter severe meteor activity in open space. But the damage it sustained was not from the swarm Captain Kirk found me drifting in. The deflector shields of his small ship were too weak to protect him from the violent assault of that original storm.

"The shields held only long enough for him to locate a possible landing site and refuge. The only one—Vendoria. Winston knew that world was under edict, forbidden to travelers, but he had no choice in the matter. It was a miracle he managed to land his vessel at all. Neither he nor his ship, however, survived the landing intact. His injuries were severe." Winston shuffled his feet.

"As is our custom, upon conclusion of primary surgery he was left in the care of a single one of us." He looked straight at her. "Me. He lived on for almost four of your years before the damage to his system exceeded the repair capabilities of our medical science.

"We became very close in those four years." There was a pause while the two looked at each other—one perhaps a little too human, the other a great deal less so.

Or was he?

"You're so much like him—his voice, his little gestures, his mannerisms. Even the inflections in certain words."

"You must understand, Anne, that my people enjoy our talent for mimicry. It is pleasure to us. But because of it we are cut off from the rest of the civilized galaxy. Therefore anything new to imitate is regarded as a great novelty. To a large extent it becomes the exclusive property of its discoverer. So it was with myself and Carter Winston.

"I often went about in his shape, this shape. For longer and longer periods of time. A most remarkable form. Wearing it gave me the greatest pleasure, because it fit so well not only physically but mentally.

"And I think Winston himself enjoyed seeing me in his own image. While my own form was not repulsive to him—as an interstellar trader he had no primitive shape prejudices—I think the chance to see and to speak with . . . himself . . . made it easier for him in his last days." Winston smiled.

"It was not as though he died with only an alien monster at his side."

"And he did say that he loved me?"

"Yes. Often. And that brings up another problem." He hesitated. "You see, I feel I absorbed a great many of the attitudes and emotions he felt. The longer I was with him, the more strongly ingrained these attitudes became. I do not know how it is with humans, but a Vendorian cannot remain in close association, let alone in the same shape, of another being without becoming in a sense a part of him.

"There were times, after our association had grown close, that when Winston grew hungry, I was hungry. If he felt tired and exhausted, I grew tired and exhausted. It became deeper

than that. If he felt pain then I, in his form, was hurt. We would commiserate together on his sad situation. I would cheer him and he would attempt to raise my spirits.

"Our unity grew even to the point where when he would feel homesick, I could feel a deep longing for a world I had never seen, would never set foot on. And," his voice dropped lower, "his love for you was very, very strong. I could not help but be affected by such a strong emotion." He looked up at her again.

"Because I was there when he died, Anne, it did not end."

Unwillingly, she found herself shaking. She let the phaser drop low, lower. He could have made a move toward her at any time now, but he didn't. All thoughts of aggression had vanished from her mind. A suspicious moisture began to form at the corners of her eyes. She raised a free hand, tried to brush it away. It wasn't possible. Tears started to trickle down her cheeks in most unmilitary fashion.

Both hands came up, but this time it was to reach out to him, instinctively.

"Carter—"

He moved close. One hand touched the fingers gripping the phaser. She didn't resist. His hands moved high, held her firmly by the shoulders and pushed gently away.

"You must not weep for me."

"Carter, I—"

"Anne, this is what I am."

He stepped back and crossed both arms over his chest. Carter Winston disappeared.

In his place rose a tall, seven-tentacled entity, a nightmare shape of thick orange cables and a bulbous, bejeweled head. It spoke, and the voice was the voice of Carter Winston—but now sounding oddly distant, echoing. It came from a voicebox no longer human.

"How could you love . . . this?"

Her hands dropped from her mouth, to which they'd jerked with the first gasp of surprise. Like most humans, she'd never seen a Vendorian. The form was as inhuman and thoroughly alien as the wildest dreams of drug-induced narcosis.

But the first shock passed. The creature crossed tentacles and once again shifted into the familiar figure of Carter Winston. There was sympathy in its once-again human voice and . . . something else?

"You see why I told you it would be best to forget me," the alien said, unaware of the change in pronoun.

"But unfortunately, *I* can't," came the voice of Captain Kirk. Both figures turned to face a side entrance. Kirk had arrived moments ahead of the requested security team. He held a phaser on Winston.

He never had a chance to use it, because the shock wave from the first bolt fired by the Romulan phaser banks threw them all to the floor of the hanger. Dazed, Kirk rolled over, tried to force himself to his feet and focus the phaser at the same time. His vision cleared rapidly and he glanced around the shuttle bay, looking frantically in all directions.

As expected, the alien was gone again.

He noticed Anne Nored. She had one hand on her forehead and was having difficulty getting to her feet. Kirk helped her up.

"Carter . . . Carter . . ."

"The Vendorian is gone, Lieutenant Nored," said Kirk tightly. "I've got to get back to the bridge. Will you be all right?"

"Yes, just a bump. I've got to get back to security." She took a step and almost fell over.

Kirk half carried, half guided her to the exit. The security team met them there.

"Ensign Tuan reporting, Captain." The excited junior officer was trying to look at Kirk respectfully and over his shoulder into, the cavernous shuttle bay at the same time. "Where's the alien, sir?"

"The alien is gone again, Mr. Tuan. And stop waving that phaser around before you hurt yourself." The ensign looked properly abashed and hurried to holster the weapon. Kirk sighed.

"Post a guard here. The outer doors are jammed, but the alien might try to burn an exit for the shuttle. Alert the armory and engineering. And security central. They'll have to start the

search over again, but maybe we can keep the thing confined to this deck, this time."

"Yes, sir."

"Lieutenant Nored, somehow I think security can manage without you." She didn't look up at him. "You come to the bridge with me. There's a chance you might be useful there."

He felt like adding a few other choice comments. She'd had the alien trapped again and once more it had escaped. While he found himself sympathizing with her state of mind, he couldn't condone her actions. Mr. Spock would be even less understanding. Meanwhile, it would be better for her on the bridge, away from the actual search. It was a better alternative than the brig.

Besides, it would be hard to claim she had let the thing get away voluntarily. The Romulans had contributed to that.

Yes, what about the Romulans?

Spock was waiting with a report. He started talking before Kirk had resumed his seat. Anne Nored wandered around the bridge, looking lost. She was still numbed, and not entirely from being thrown to the deck.

"Direct hit, Captain," Spock informed him calmly. "There is some damage to the secondary propulsive systems. Their commander has apparently weighed his choices and has concluded we've had enough time to make up our minds. He's ready to fight."

"I only felt one shock wave, Mr. Spock. No subsequent attacks?"

"No, Captain. Only the single phaser strike."

"Then he's hoping to force our hand, one way or the other, but he still wants the ship. There's nothing in the damaged section but automatic machinery. He's trying to avoid casualties at this point, trying to disable us without giving a reason for an all-out battle."

He looked back to Lt. M'ress, at the communications console now, as she broke in on his summary.

"The Rromulan commanderr is signaling, sirr. Shall I put him on the scrreen?"

"I'd rather you put him . . . go ahead, Lieutenant."

A moment later the face of the Romulan leader had once more taken the place of his ships on the main viewscreen.

The Romulans would make terrible poker players, Kirk reflected. Their expressions were even broader and less inhibited than those of humans. Their ambassadors and consuls must have a terrible time practicing the wiles of diplomacy.

For example, the commander now undoubtedly thought he was maintaining the Romulan equivalent of a straight face, but his expectant smile reached from ear to ear.

"Captain Kirk," he began, and there was unconcealed anticipation in his voice, too. I wonder what he's up to now, Kirk mused. He didn't relish the pickle they'd gotten themselves into.

"All our main batteries are trained on your ship. I have observed a . . . ah, singular lack of defensive effort on your part. To resist at this point would be not only useless but criminally wasteful of life.

"If you have no regard for yourself or your ship, think of your crew. Our recent attack was intentionally directed at uninhabited areas of your ship. I cannot guarantee the selectivity of gunners in the future." He managed to look apologetic as he leaned forward slightly.

"Will you now surrender your vessel? As you know, my people are not in the habit of giving second chances."

That was the Romulan's way of telling him that, yes, he wanted the *Enterprise* and no, he didn't want it enough to give him any more time. Kirk's thoughts raced.

He might be able, to figure a way out of this, if the back of his mind wasn't busy worrying about what the Vendorian was up to. And he could cope with the Vendorian if it wasn't for the Romulans. But the two of them together!

It didn't matter. He didn't have any more time, anyway.

Without full deflectors, he thought angrily, we're just a clay pigeon for them. Kirk had never seen a clay pigeon in his life and probably wouldn't have recognized one if it had fallen into his lunch. But archaic metaphors had a way of sticking around in the terran language.

"Practicality does suggest capitulation at this point, Captain," observed Spock. "I, too, see no solution to our present dilemma. There are other starships, there is no other self."

Of course, there are other ships, Kirk thought. But how much chance would he have of getting another command after giving up the *Enterprise* without firing a shot?

And what chance did his crew have? Could he guarantee their safety once the *Enterprise* was in Romulan hands?

Sulu had been morosely monitoring inship as well as exterior sensors, checking his gauges and dials. Now he interrupted Spock's advice excitedly . . . interrupted Kirk's depression. Interrupted all action on the bridge.

"Captain, I don't understand . . . but the deflector shields are coming up again!"

In two steps Kirk was at his shoulder, staring down at the indicators in disbelief "It's only one shield—"

"Yes, sir, but it's our prime defensive screen, and it's between us and the Romulans. Look," he pointed to one energy gauge, "it's operating at full strength."

Kirk rushed back to his chair. A wise man does not question the sudden appearance of a cache of spears when the barbarians are at his gate. He throws them. Time to question their origin when pulling them out of his attackers.

They had to act immediately, before some idle technician on one of the battle cruisers noticed the resurgence of strength in the *Enterprise*'s defensive fields.

"Mr. Sulu, aim for the propulsion units on the lead Romulan vessel. Phasers and photon torpedoes in combination." Sulu's hands played the controls like an organ.

"Phasers and torpedoes ready, sir."

"We've got to get one with this first burst, Mr. Sulu."

"Will do, Captain."

"Fire!"

"Firing, sir."

"Evasive action. Mr. Sulu, keep that good screen between us and the Romulans."

The Romulan commander had long since vanished from the screen. M'ress had automatically substituted the sensor view of the two battle cruisers. It was too bad, in a way. Kirk would have given a lot to see the commander's face right now.

He could see the phaser beams striking at the rear of the nearest ship.

"They're pursuing, sir," reported Sulu evenly. "Both of them."

Kirk only nodded. They'd probably expected him to try and run, but not to fight.

There was a sudden bright flash at the stern of the first ship. The Romulan's screens had handled the *Enterprise*'s heavy phasers, but one, possibly two, of the powerful photon torpedoes had slipped through their screens. The wounded vessel seemed to hesitate, then vanished instantly from the screen—not destroyed, but slowed.

"Second vessel firing Captain," said Spock. Kirk tensed.

"Phasers and—" Before he could finish, the bridge rocked to a strong shock wave as the *Enterprise* took the force of the attack from the remaining pursuer. This was no disabling strike, but one designed to tear the starship apart.

The amazingly resurgent deflector shield held. Artificial gravity stabilized and the regular ship's lights remained on.

"Minor damage to E and H decks," reported Spock moments later. "Casualties on E deck, minor hulling and air loss in four compartments. Automatic sealant is handling the damage."

"Lock on second target," Kirk ordered calmly. He noticed M'ress looking at him with admiration. She didn't sweat, but she was panting heavily—nervous, Kirk knew. Obviously she didn't know that starship captains only sweated on the inside of their skins. That's why they were so irritable all the time.

"Locking on second vessel, Captain," came Sulu's reply. A second later, "locked on, sir."

"Phasers and torpedoes, Mr. Sulu. Stagger the torps, try to run them at the same spot." Maybe they could overload the Romulan's shields at one point. Discouraging her ought to be as effective as destroying her.

"Firing, Captain."

There were brilliant flashes on the screen from the vicinity of the Romulan ship as her screens reeled under the dual assault. Sulu's eyes remained glued to his indicators, his voice a battle monotone.

"Phasers . . . direct hit, sir." There was a flash so bright it blanked out the screen for a moment. "Two photon torpedo hits."

But the Romulan, now warned, had brought his shields up to maximum power and had taken the blinding energies without damage. Kirk heard Spock's report and tried not to look disappointed. If the Romulan computers got a torpedo in behind their one good deflector shield . . .

"Prepare to fire again, Mr. Sulu."

"Standing by, sir."

The third attack wasn't necessary. One second the Romulan ship was hard in pursuit, the next it was fading rapidly from sensor range as her commander broke off the engagement and headed back into the depths of the neutral zone.

"Losing contact, sir," reported Sulu. "She's arcing."

Kirk's voice was full of relief and satisfaction. "Going back to help her disabled companion. Good. A fight to the end wouldn't do either side any good."

"Maybe the pounding we gave the first one," Sulu began, but Kirk was shaking his head.

"I don't think so, Mr. Sulu. The Romulans exhibit a number of reprehensible characteristics, but cowardice isn't one of them. No, they were expecting our defenses to collapse. That's why they didn't attack right away. When our shields suddenly went back up—

"Their whole plan from the moment of interception was predicated on a number of things happening. When their carefully laid schedule started to go awry, they decided to call it off. The Romulans like their ambushes neatly planned in advance. They don't like surprises.

"Speaking of surprises, Mr. Spock, exactly how badly did we damage that other Romulan? Check your recorders, please." Spock turned back to the library computer console, activated the request.

"I hope it wasn't too bad," Kirk added. "Severe damage or loss of life might force the Romulan High Command into continuing a fight they've lost interest in. They've got a lot of pride." Spock's answer relieved Kirk's concern on that score.

"First vessel's main power supply was knocked out, Captain. Injuries to personnel should be minimal. She should be able to run on secondary drive, but slowly. With the aid of the other ship the Romulans should be able to repair her well enough to reach their nearest naval station."

Kirk grunted in satisfaction. He swung to look at the elevator as engineer Scott appeared, approaching him.

"Good work, Mr. Scott. That deflector shield went up just in time."

Scott's reaction was not what Kirk expected. Instead of a smile of pleasure at the compliment, the chief engineer looked confused, startled.

"But, sir, the shield connections haven't all been repaired yet. I came forward to see if I could be of help up here. My technicians are still carrying out the final repairs. They'll need over an hour yet, just like I said."

Spock left his library station and walked over to join the conversation.

"Interesting."

"But, confound it, Scotty, the shields went up! At least, the main one did. If you haven't finished repairs, then what—" He paused. A sudden gleam of comprehension dawned.

"Of course! Winston, or rather, the Vendorian."

"It is not outside the realm of possibility, Captain," agreed Spock. "If he could rearrange his own internal structure to become an examination table, one must assume that he could also rearrange himself to become—"

"A deflector shield?" Despite the evidence that seemed to point to the Vendorian, Kirk was doubtful. "And take the uncontrolled energy of a battle cruiser's full assault phasers?" He shook his head. He wanted to believe such a thing was possible, but—

"Vendorians are marvelous mimics, Mr. Spock, but super-beings they're not. No living organism could spread its substance that thin and take that kind of—"

"He did not become the deflector *shield*, Captain," Spock corrected. "There are many instruments—complex controls, switching elements and other electronic components—in a medical examination table. I cannot conceive of a single creature becoming a deflector shield, either, but a series of broken cables, force-links, and other damaged connections? Do not forget, the Vendorian had an excellent look at the very linkages he broke."

Scott had been listening to all this and had achieved nothing except some practice in feeling twitchy. Now his curiosity turned to frustration.

"Will someone please tell me what's been goin' on?" he pleaded, thoroughly confused.

Before either officer could reply, the doors to the elevator dilated again. They all glanced automatically in that direction.

The orange shape that half-stood, half-floated in the portal was by now familiar to Kirk and Spock, but the nightmarish image was something new to Scott and the other bridge personnel. M'ress hissed softly.

"What manner of beastie is that?" gulped Scott.

"That is your deflector shield, Mr. Scott," said Spock.

"My defle—" Scott's look showed he wasn't sure which was more alien—the thing in the doorway or the ship's first officer. He looked back at the Vendorian.

"That is essentially true," the Vendorian commented in the voice of Carter Winston. It sidled toward them "I did what I could." Despite its multiple lenses, it turned and seemed to face Kirk, a human gesture.

"I assume the danger to your ship is over, Captain?"

"It is. Unless the Romulans have some other surprises."

"I do not believe that they do," the Vendorian replied. "I am glad. I'm sorry that I endangered your ship and your people. Such was not my intention."

Now maybe Kirk could get the answer to a question that had been bothering him ever since they found out that the strange spy was a Vendorian.

"Why did you do it? What possible reward could the Romulans have offered you?"

"To understand that, Captain, it is necessary to tell you a little about myself. The remainder can be supplied by Lieutenant Nored." Kirk glanced over at the lieutenant, who was watching the Vendorian closely.

"My . . . attachment . . . to the human Carter Winston provoked much comment among my people, Captain. I have always felt and acted somewhat differently from the Vendorian norm. Mental deviates are not treated with compassion on Vendoria.

"As Carter Winston continued to live and I continued to spend more and more time attending him, my aberration became much commented upon. But there was a lock, a bond between us that transcended mere shape and species. I felt I somehow had more in common with the injured human than with other Vendorians.

"They began to shun me. I became an outcast among my own kind, Captain. But this I did not mind . . . as long as Winston lived. But when he died, my people continued to look upon me with distaste, to avoid my company and presence. I grew by turns lonely, then bitter, and then desperately lonely once again.

"Though time passed, my situation did not change. I was still treated as a pariah. When a Romulan ship visited the town on whose outskirts I lived as a recluse—" He paused. "They have been visiting Vendoria quite regularly, by the way, for the past several of your years, always hoping to ally themselves with my people. But we would have none of them."

"Interesting," commented Spock. "I must make a note of that. I know my father, as well as a number of other ambassadors, will be interested in such information. I expect they will have a few words to exchange with their Romulan counterpart." He moved away, back to the library station, to dictate a report of the Romulan's violation of the Vendorian quarantine.

"You were saying," prodded Kirk, "that your people would have nothing to do with the Romulans."

"And why should they? The Romulans had nothing to offer them. But I," and the faint light of the eye lenses seemed to

glow a little more intensely, "I was another story. My people had rejected me. I was a useless outcast.

"The Romulans had nothing to offer me—except a life, Captain. A chance to perform functions of value. We may seem at times a frivolous and idle race, but it is literally a matter of life and death for a Vendorian to be occupied in a useful function, to be doing something of value.

"Vendoria no longer offered me this; indeed, by their lack of companionship my people effectively forbade it to me. So in desperation I agreed to do what the Romulans requested of me. You must understand, Captain, that function among us, to be considered worthwhile, must be of value not only to the doer, but also to someone else."

From the first, Kirk's feelings toward this alien intruder had been somewhat less than fraternal. But as Winston's "voice" spun a tale of a tortured past, he found himself coming to regard the Vendorian less and less as a belligerent invader and more as an individual, a victim of circumstances beyond his control—a prisoner condemned by his own compassion.

"What finally changed your mind about the Romulans—and us?"

"It seems, Captain, that I have become more Carter Winston than I knew. Perhaps my friends and associates on Vendoria sensed it even better than I. My refusal to recognize this change in myself no doubt drove them even farther from me.

"I had to fight myself to comply with the Romulans when they first revealed to me their plan to take your ship. But finally I realized that if they could not capture the ship, they were willing to destroy it and all of you on board. That's when I felt the sorrow that I know Carter Winston would have felt.

"He loved life and other lives so much, Captain Kirk. Because of him I could not allow the Romulans to harm Anne, or any of you.

"So as you and Mr. Spock have surmised, I changed myself yet again. I became the very linkages in the deflector system that I had broken. It was . . . very difficult. The most difficult change I have ever had to make. The internal arrangements especially had to be so precise, so delicately aligned. I had to

structure myself to permit current to pass through my body." He seemed to sway back and forth on those thick tentacles.

"But I could not allow you to come to physical harm through my actions. Through the actions of . . . of Carter Winston."

Kirk nodded slowly. "I think I understand. At least, I think I understand as well as it's possible for a non-Vendorian to."

"I cannot go back to the Romulans now," echoed the hollow voice. "I have menaced your ship and its people, and I cannot go back to Vendoria. What will happen to me now?"

This was ridiculous! The creature swaying slowly in front of Kirk had nearly caused the destruction of the *Enterprise*. Kirk had no business, no business at all, feeling sorry for it.

However . . .

"You'll have to stand some sort of trial first, I suppose," Kirk guessed. Abruptly he found himself working very hard and not too successfully to suppress a smile.

"To my knowledge, no Vendorian has ever been tried in a Federation court before. I expect they'll have to make some rather novel arrangements to prevent you from becoming, say, the judge or the jury computer.

"But you did save the *Enterprise* from the Romulans. You've done both good and evil to us in a very short space of time, Vendorian."

"Carter Winston will serve as well as any name, Captain. He has not had need of it for many months, now. And somehow the name feels . . . right."

"Okay, Winston. It will be up to the court to decide whether or not saving us from the very difficulty you plunged us into in the first place obviates your initial belligerence." He touched the back of his neck, remembering.

"Personally, I don't intend to press charges. And I don't think anyone else will, either. It's the gentlest assault I've ever been subjected to."

"Thank you, Captain."

"Until we can put you planetside, I think it would be best for the mental stability of my crew if you remained in the guise of Carter Winston."

"I understand, James Kirk." Tentacles lifted and crossed. Lt. M'ress hadn't witnessed the transformation yet, and she hissed softly. Once more the orange cephalopod was gone. Carter Winston stood in its place.

"I'm also afraid," Kirk continued, trying to put some bite into his voice, "that I'll have to ask you to remain under guard. I'm beginning to trust you, I think, but—"

"That's all right, Captain," smiled Winston. "You'll feel better knowing I'm under observation, at least until we are back in Federation-controlled territory. Knowing that the pair of pants you put on in the morning really are a pair of pants."

"You've appropriated Winston's sense of humor, too, I see." Kirk's smile grew. "I think you're going to be all right . . . Carter. I'll buzz security. One guard ought to be enough." He edged a hand toward the call button.

"Captain, could you possibly assign me that duty?" Kirk had completely forgotten about Anne Nored. He glanced over at her. In doing so he completely missed the expression of surprise that had come over Carter Winston's face.

"But—" Winston stuttered, "you have seen me. You know what I am."

"I've been a starship officer for some years now, Carter," she whispered. "You see, I've changed a little, too. Since we've been apart I've seen a lot of strange things pinwheeling about this universe, even a few that might shock you. In the final analysis form doesn't seem nearly as important as certain other things.

"As Carter Winston—even as a part of him—I think there's a better life for you than the Romulans or anyone else can offer. Oh, damn!" She actually stamped her foot. "I don't know how to say it—can we at least talk about that?" Her eyes were imploring.

"I don't . . . know." Kirk saw that Winston was totally confused. This was the last thing he'd ever anticipated. Helplessly he looked to Kirk, who nodded at Anne.

"You have the guard detail, Lieutenant."

She smiled. "Thank you, sir." She gazed back at Carter Winston with a look of . . . Kirk shook his head. Anne Nored

was right. The universe was indeed full of beautiful, strange, and unexpected surprises.

They headed for the elevator.

As it happened, McCoy was on his way up in the same cab. He moved to one side and watched as alien and Anne got in. The door closed behind them.

The doctor stood pondering for a moment. Then he crossed to where the *Enterprise*'s three other senior officers were clustered in animated conversation.

"You caught him."

"Acute observation, doctor."

McCoy's mouth twisted. "Ho-ho-ho and a Merry Christmas to you, too, Spock." He looked over at Kirk. "I'm glad to see him under guard, Jim. If he'd turned into a second Spock, it would have been too much to take."

How prophetic are the idle jests of man! There would come a time when McCoy would have occasion, if not the desire, to recall that phrase.

But for now it only provoked an innocent chuckle from Kirk and Scott.

"Perhaps so, doctor," the first officer of the *Enterprise* agreed. "But then, two doctor McCoys might just bring the level of medical efficiency on this ship up to acceptable minimums."

"Careful, Doctor McCoy," warned a grinning Scotty as McCoy, topped again, did a slow burn. "I'm not sure life-support can keep things livable with all the heat you're puttin' out."

"Heat? I'll give you heat . . .!" McCoy began.

THE INFINITE VULCAN

(Adapted from a script by Walter Koenig)

I

"Captain's log, stardate 5503.1. Escort of the Carson's World/Bethulia ore shipment having been assigned to other vessels, the *Enterprise* has been ordered to survey a new planet recently discovered at the Federation-Galactic fringe."

Kirk clicked off and stared at the fore viewscreen. The journey out from Kinshasa had been peaceful and uneventful. Now an Earth-type world with a normal scattering of clouds, seas, and brownish land masses filled the screen.

He wasn't surprised Starfleet Command had diverted the *Enterprise* from escort to survey duty. The discovery of a potentially colonizable unclaimed world took precedence over any but the direst emergency. It was interesting, pleasant duty. And if Vice-Admiral van Leeuwenhook had pulled a few strings to get the *Enterprise* the choice assignment, well, it was only a reward for a job well done.

It was imperative to make an official survey and lay claim to the world quickly—before the Klingons, say, or the Romulans discovered it. Inhabitable worlds were not all that common, and competition for expansion was fierce.

Furthermore, this globe seemed to be a real prize to the astronomers using the Moana predictor. Not only did preliminary orbital scans insist it was inhabitable, it checked out as downright lush—a garden world.

Everything seemed to point to a choice discovery, just waiting for her first load of Federation settlers—until Sulu's surface probes located the city.

"Inhabitants, Mr. Sulu?" That would be the end of any colonization.

Sulu's expression was uncertain. "No intelligent reading, sir. But it's hard to be sure. There's such an abundance of lower life—plants and small animals—registering that it will take time to sort out any intelligent forms. One thing's certain, if it's a major metropolis, it sure isn't overcrowded."

"I'd rather not wait for secondary analysis, Mr. Sulu." Kirk rose from the command chair. "Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy. You'll accompany Mr. Sulu and me on the landing party. Mr. Scott, you're in charge."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk headed for the door. "Scotty, buzz down to security and have them send along a couple of people to go down with us. This kind of life-form density implies the presence of predators as well as grazers."

"Yes, sir," Scott acknowledged as he slid into the command chair.

The party of six assembled in the transporter room with admirable speed.

"Put us down near the center of the city, Mr. Kyle," Kirk instructed the transporter chief. "If there are inhabitants I want to meet them right away. It's always best to size up the local populace before the high muckamucks come running with official greetings."

Kyle nodded. His hands moved on the controls.

The city was magnificent.

Wide green spaces alternated with soaring angular structures that looked more like idealized cathedrals than functional buildings. Spires and glasslike towers were laced together with a network of arching bridges and spunsugar roadways, many fading to near invisibility in the bright sunlight.

The metropolis was constructed along gigantic lines, everything built to proportions four times human scale. Yet it was a place of beauty and grace.

It was also dead.

No policeman panicked at their appearance. No busy citizen halted in his daily stroll to gawk at the alien magicians who had materialized beside him. No curious crowds gathered 'round, and no one notified the local president, chief, or leading hooligan.

Dead.

Weeds, vines, and something like a thick terrestrial seaweed had made the city their own now. Even the shiniest, newest-looking structure was clothed in a blanket of climbing greenery. Greenery, and less wholesome looking plant life.

They began walking toward what they estimated to be the center of the city. Sulu and Spock were busy making continual tricorder readings.

"Life readings are still confused, sir. I can't sort them out, yet."

"There is something else, Captain," added Spock. "I am getting a sensor reading on some form of generated power—" He looked around and after a moment's search, pointed ahead. "From that building."

"Let's check it out," said Kirk. He was at once pleased and disappointed. Pleased that there seemed to be no barriers to development of this world, and disappointed at the thought that the architects of this dream city no longer existed. They walked toward the structure in question.

Sulu paused a moment, trying to recalibrate his tricorder to screen out another identified low-life form. Then he frowned and glanced skyward.

The sun glare blocked out his view of . . . what? He thought he'd heard a flapping sound, but they'd seen no animals on this world yet. When the dots cleared from his eyes he looked again. The only sky riders were clouds.

Hmph. He took a step after the others, glanced downward as he set his foot—and stopped. The tiny plant looked like a sporing dandelion. Moving his tricorder close he took a standard reading. Results were anything but. Unaware of the fuss it was causing, the fuzzy, delicate top of the plant quivered slightly in a gentle breeze.

"Well, now, what's this?"

The building the others were approaching appeared to be well maintained. Surprisingly well, Kirk thought. Perhaps the city wasn't as dead as it looked. Here was one structure that the mosslike growth and other climbing vegetation hadn't encroached. Its front walkway was clean, the window ports all intact and throwing back the morning sunlight.

"Captain, Captain!"

Kirk and the others whirled. Ush and Digard, the two security men, moved their hands toward their weapons.

"What is it, Mr. Sulu?"

"You're going to have to decide for yourself, sir." He had come up to them. Now he stopped and pointed to the ground near his feet. Everyone looked down.

There was nothing there except some smooth gravel set in a layer of earth—and a single fluffy, fuzzy little growth. Looked like a dandelion, Kirk mused.

"How long," he asked gently, "has it been since you've had a long leave of duty, Lieutenant? I thought Valeria was enough for anyone, but—"

"No, sir, really, look!"

The helmsman took a couple of steps to one side. There was a tiny popping sound like a foot pulling out of mud as the fuzzy raised itself off the ground. It scurried on miniature roots after Sulu. As soon as it reached his side—how it could tell where it was was another mystery—the root endings promptly made like a corkscrew and burrowed contentedly into the earth.

Kirk's stare was incredulous. If it wasn't so undeniably alien, the fuzzy would be downright funny.

"What is that thing?"

"It's an ambulatory plant. When it stops, it takes up new residence. The little fellers are all over the place." He moved back to his first position. The fuzzy popped, skittered after him, and repeated the rooting operation.

"I think it likes me."

Kirk shook his head. "We always encourage our officers to make friends with the natives."

"I always did think your personality was kind of wooden, Sulu," said McCoy idly.

"That's fighting dirty, old bean," the helmsman countered.

"It's a good thing they're *not* intelligent," Kirk observed.

"Captain," Spock broke in, looking up from his tricorder, "I dislike interrupting your amusing byplay, but that power reading now gives evidence of being an electronic probe of some sophistication. I believe we are being scanned."

Kirk's phaser came out, and the others reacted seconds later.

"Phasers on stun—stay alert. Mr. Sulu, Mr. Digard, stay here. Mr. Ush, come with me, please."

Kirk, McCoy, Spock, and the second security man moved toward the building. Sulu watched them go anxiously. But when time passed and nothing leaped out to blast the earth from under them, he quickly lost interest. He found his gaze dropping down to the friendly fuzzy.

Obeying an impulse, he knelt and picked it up.

"Ow!"

Well, what—Friendly, indeed! He dropped the plant quickly, shaking his finger to try and relieve the pain. He examined the injured digit with concern. The fuzzy, as if unaware that anything unusual had taken place, burrowed back into the soil.

Sulu mumbled to himself. "Must have been a thorn. Oh, well."

The entrance had no solid door. Instead, the opening doglegged to the left and out of sight. Moving cautiously, they edged around the U-shaped portal. It opened without warning into a gigantic room.

No, the room wasn't gigantic in itself. It was just that it was built to the same four-times-human scale as the city. Like the building's exterior, the room was clean and orderly. Lights on panels and consoles flashed on and off. There was a constant hum from powerful, hidden machinery. It looked very much like a laboratory.

There was no longer a question about the city being dead. Everything about the room suggested constant, everyday use. Spock gestured toward a towering wall panel flecked with odd-shaped switches and knobs.

"The probe originates in this instrument wall," he informed them, checking his tricorder. "As does an incredibly powerful force-field shield. I cannot imagine the purpose of the wall instrumentation, but the presence of the force field indicates that someone does not want it tampered with."

There were several high shelves in the wall next to the panel. The lower ones held, among other things, a pile of

alien yet still recognizable cassettes filled with scrolls of tape. One scroll cassette sat in a playback slot. Spock pulled it out and began examining it closely. Nothing appeared to object to this sudden manipulation of the cassette.

McCoy was busy with his medical tricorder. Suddenly he looked up in astonishment.

"Jim! I'm picking up a humanoid life-reading of incredible strength. It's as if it—"

"EEEYAAHHHH!"

The agonized scream came from outside the chamber. Readings, tapes, everything were forgotten as they raced for the street. Spock absently slipped the cassette into a pocket.

Sulu was stretched out on the ground. His arms and legs were splayed wide apart and rigid with unnatural stiffness. No one had to ask what was wrong with him. He was almost totally paralyzed. Only his eyes made frantic motions.

Ensign Digard stood alert and gripped his phaser tightly, hunting for some unseen enemy to use it on. McCoy swung his medical tricorder around on his shoulder and knelt beside the motionless helmsman.

"What happened?" he asked Digard.

"I don't know, Doctor!" The guard's voice was wild. "I didn't see a thing. I was standing here, watching the entrance you went into, when Mr. Sulu just—screamed, all of a sudden, and fell over."

McCoy studied the first readings on the tricorder. His words were curt, clipped.

"He's been poisoned. Some kind of nerve toxin. Composition unknown, naturally."

He nudged the tricorder aside and skillful hands worked at the small containers in his belt medikit. A narrow tube was produced. McCoy didn't even bother to roll up the helmsman's shirt sleeve, simply jammed the tube against his upper arm.

Pulling it away, McCoy proceeded to check a tiny gauge set into the side of the metal pencil. His frown deepened and he reset an all but invisible dial below the indicator. Again he pressed it to Sulu's arm, paused, and pulled it away. A second check of the gauge and McCoy seemed to slump slightly, shaking his head in frustration.

"Can you help him?" Kirk had to break the choking silence.

"I don't know, Jim, I don't know. Blast! I can't get a correlation with any known venom." He shrugged sadly. "Either they're too alien to affect your system and they don't bother you at all or else you run up against something like this." His head jerked towards Sulu.

"Antidotes are always found—after the first few autopsies."

Kirk tried to sound hopeful. "Maybe the ship's medical computer can . . .?"

"Forget with the medical computer!" McCoy snarled. "He's got two minutes to live, unless I can find an answer." He muttered angrily to himself.

"Anaphase . . . synopmist . . . dylovene . . . maybe dylovene." The ineffectual tube was returned to his belt and a slightly larger instrument substituted. A quick adjustment of the hypo setting and then it was applied to Sulu's other arm.

There was a gentle hissing sound. McCoy pulled the hypo away and waited. After a few seconds he took another reading with the tricorder, concentrating on the newly treated region.

"No good, it's no good," he husked. "Soon the venom will reach his vital organs. Dylovene takes too much time to work . . . assuming it would work—"

"Maybe a stronger dose," Kirk urged.

"That won't be necessary," came a soft, pleasant voice. A new voice was about the only thing that could have turned their attention from Sulu at that moment. They spun to face the direction the voice had come from—the entrance to the laboratorylike building.

Five beings stood there. Their only similarity to man or Vulcan was in the question of size. Beyond that superficiality, they were utterly alien.

Their heads—Kirk presumed those faintly oval shapes topping the rest of their bodies were heads—were partly covered with a fine furry bristle. Two waving eyestalks were the only visible projections. There was no hint of a mouth, ears, nose, or any other recognizable external sense organ.

The bodies themselves were composed of a tight bunching of slender, ropelike extensions, some of which seemed to

hang loosely at their sides like a long fringe. Other extensions grouped tightly together near the bottom before spreading out into a haphazard assortment of bulbous protuberances. Kirk guessed that these served as motive limbs for the creatures. This was revealed as so when they started to approach the landing party.

Their color was an ocher-yellow-green—not especially healthy-looking, but for all Kirk knew, the local version of a good tan. Perhaps they regarded Kirk's own fleshy-pink as a sign that he was nearing the last stages of desiccation.

Despite the complete strangeness of their appearance, Kirk felt none of the revulsion toward them that some more humanoid aliens could produce. Maybe it was their apparent passivity. They showed no sign of caution or of the usual wary belligerence.

If anything, they seemed inherently peaceful.

They got another surprise when the leader of the group spoke. Not only were the words intelligible, they were downright smooth. The tone was quiet, reasoned. Resigned, Kirk thought idly, wondering at the ability of the human mind to make jokes in the most unfunny situations.

He noticed out of the corner of an eye that Spock was taking a discreet tricorder reading on their visitors. The first officer's diplomacy might be ineffectual. The aliens might be perceptive enough to tell what he was doing. On the other hand, they might ignore Spock if he walked three times 'round their leader, bumping him with the tricorder.

Still, as with any first contact, it didn't hurt to be as tactful as possible. There were other things on Kirk's mind at that moment, however, which made attention to protocol difficult. All he could blurt out was, "Who are you?"

The being leading the group—who was a little taller than his four companions—replied softly.

"I am called Agmar. I believe we can help."

Kirk nodded once and turned away from him—if it was a "him." He kept his voice low as he murmured to Spock.

"What are you getting on them? Who are we dealing with here, Spock?"

"A moment, please, Captain. Give me a little time. The information I have thus far obtained does not permit a reasonable answer yet." He made an adjustment to the tricorder.

Meanwhile the five aliens had moved to surround the unmoving Sulu. The leader, Agmar, bent over the unconscious helmsman—a smooth, supple movement, like a reed bending with the wind.

Jointless, that explained it. Agmar and his companions moved without the stiffness of human joints.

Hovering motionless over Sulu, the eyestalks studied the prone form for several seconds. Then one of the free-hanging limblike extensions moved out from Agmar's side to extend over the body. A drop of some viscous liquid was extruded from the green tip.

McCoy, who'd kept a watchful eye on the whole sequence, now felt obliged to step in.

"Just a minute. I can't let you . . . whatever you are . . . inject him with some—" he hesitated, momentarily flustered, "—alien tree sap!"

Agmar's reply took no notice of the implied insult. "To wait is to assure your friend's death." A single eyestalk swiveled independently, like a chameleon's, to stare at McCoy. "I must proceed."

"Bones—" Kirk put a restraining hand on the doctor's shoulder. "Let them help."

"All right, Jim. But I don't like the whole idea." He turned away and strolled over to where Spock was still working with his tricorder.

"An interesting discovery, Doctor. These beings are of botanical origin."

"Intelligent plants?"

"So it would seem."

The loose tentacle dipped lower. With a gentle touch, Agmar applied the drop of golden liquid to the side of Sulu's neck. Now both eyestalks turned to observe the watching humans.

"It is a powerful antidote, quickly absorbed. He should begin to respond momentarily."

"Of course," suggested McCoy, still a little miffed, "it's of a completely alien nature and may not have any effect on him at all."

"True, Doctor," Spock agreed, "yet the same could be said of the poison which has so obviously affected him. I see no reason why the antidote should be rejected."

"Thanks," was all Kirk could think of to say to the creature. It rose, repeating the same supple movement.

"Welcome to the planet Phylos."

They certainly seemed friendly enough. A fraternal greeting and a badly needed helping hand, all in the first moments of contact. Still, he wasn't quite ready to fall all over himself in an orgy of backslapping. He'd been on too many worlds where the obviously black had turned out at the last moment to be white, to the detriment of the unfortunate caught in the color change.

But until given a reason why, he would treat the Phylosians as friends.

"I'm Captain James Kirk. This is Mr. Spock, my first officer; Dr. McCoy . . ." He went on to identify the rest of the landing party, including the motionless Sulu.

"You seem to have been expecting us, Agmar."

A tentacle (limb?) fluttered in the direction of the laboratory building.

"Our instruments have scanned and tracked you since your vessel first entered our space, Captain. We had reasons for not revealing ourselves immediately to you. But the injury to your companion compelled us to shed our hiding.

"We are a peaceful people, and we have a fear of aliens." The Phylosian spokesman seemed to hesitate. "We have had unfortunate meetings with such in the past." Kirk nodded understandingly, glanced over at Spock.

Role reversal was always difficult. *They* were the aliens, not the Phylosians.

There was a movement on the ground, and he found his attention drawn back to Sulu. The helmsman was still prone, but no longer motionless. He was starting to squirm like a man waking from a long sleep.

"What happened to him, anyway?" His touch of professional jealousy now long forgotten, a curious McCoy spoke while kneeling near Sulu and running his medical tricorder over the helmsman's chest. Scientific interest had taken over.

"He was bitten by the Retlaw plant. It is deadly only if the wound is left unattended."

"Mobile plants seem to be the rule on this world, rather than animals," Kirk observed, hoping he wasn't treading on someone's religion. But Agmar took no offense.

"That is so."

"Your medication worked quickly."

Agmar didn't shrug—he couldn't, having no shoulders—but Kirk felt he could sense the equivalent.

"A minor achievement."

"Minor achievement!" blurted McCoy, looking up in disbelief from his tricorder readings. "I never saw an antitoxin work so fast. I don't know anything about your other sciences, but if this is a 'minor' sample of your medical capabilities, I'd like to chat with some of your doctors."

"Doctors?"

"Physicians—healers."

"Ah," Agmar exclaimed. "Yes, Doctor McCoy. I understand now. But you must realize that healing is not a specialized function among my people."

"Not special—" McCoy looked incredulous. "You mean you're *all* doctors?"

"Not in the way you mean, Doctor McCoy. But each has the ability to . . . to repair a number of damaged bodily functions. We will talk of this more, later, if you wish."

"I wish, I wish!" McCoy looked rather like the little boy about to be let loose in the candy store. A low moan from Sulu precluded further conversation.

The helmsman's eyes were open, and he appeared to be making motions of getting up. McCoy made another pass with the tricorder. Then he looked up and nodded. Amazement still tinged his words.

"Something's destroying the poison left in his bloodstream, all right. Body functions are running up to normal. And I mean

running." He glanced at the Phylosian leader.

"Look, Agmar. Agreed, if the poison affects humans, a local antidote conceivably might. Clearly does, in fact. But how could you be so sure it would work?"

"We could not be sure," the Phylosian replied softly. "But there have been humanoid aliens on Phylos before. Besides, it was the only chance left for your friend."

"Humanoid aliens who spoke our language?" asked Spock.

"Ah, you are curious as to our method of translation and communication. The voder, a mechanical translator." He reached into the folds of his central body area. For a fleeting moment Kirk expected him to remove a mouth.

Instead, Agmar produced a small, round, flat disk of metal. When he "spoke," his voice came from the center of the disk.

"Our natural organs of verbal communication are quite small. They require a great deal of artificial amplification to be effective any distance. The voder is completely self-contained and most efficient for this purpose."

"Most," agreed Spock, hoping for a chance to take one of the unbelievably compact instruments apart.

Such charming exchanges of mutual admiration were fine, Kirk reflected, but right now other things concerned him more.

"I like puzzles, Agmar, but I also like answers. We were pretty convinced when we first set down in your city that there was no one here. Then we find you—or rather, you find us. Yet I find it hard to believe that the few of you are the sole inhabitants of this metropolis. We're not exactly standing in the middle of a local desert. Where are the rest of your people?"

"Your curiosity does your profession credit, Captain Kirk, and it shall be satisfied. Come with us and we will show you."

Kirk looked down at Sulu. With McCoy's help, he was struggling to his feet.

"How do you feel, Mr. Sulu."

The helmsman blinked. "I'm . . . I'm all right now, Captain . . . I think. One moment I was sucking my finger and the next —wham!" His voice was that of a man waking from a dream

and finding it reality. "I felt like an incendiary grenade had gone off inside me."

"Can you walk?"

"Yes. I'm okay, sir." Sulu straightened himself.

"All right, then." Kirk turned back to Agmar. "Let's go."

The Phylosian turned—perhaps pivoted would be more accurate—and ambled off in the direction of the building next to the laboratory. His companions, none of whom had yet ventured a word, turned with him. Kirk and the other bipeds followed.

"You sure you're all right, Sulu?" pressed McCoy.

"Fine, Doctor." The navigation officer even managed a slight smile. "Hard to believe now that there was ever anything wrong with me."

McCoy shook his head and muttered to himself. "Remarkable . . . crazy and remarkable . . ."

"Yes," added Spock softly. "How fortunate for us that Agmar and his fellows were so close by."

"You said it!" agreed McCoy fervently. Something scratched at his mind, and he gave Spock an uncertain glance. But the science officer gave no sign that his words meant anything but what they said. He speeded up to come alongside Kirk.

They entered the building, turning first through another of the unbarred but mazelike entrances. Inside they found themselves in a hall of titanic proportions stretching endlessly into the distance. The metal walls rose to form a domed ceiling high overhead. A skylight running the whole length of the enormous corridor was set into the curving roof.

Agmar stopped. Kirk slowly turned a full circle before returning his attention to the alien.

"Well, where are your people, Agmar?"

Instead of answering, Agmar went to a panel set in one wall and depressed several hidden switches. There was the slightest hissing sound. One security guard reached instinctively for his phaser and looked properly abashed when no threat materialized.

A tall, high door slid aside in the nearest section of wall. Row upon row of glasslike cases, looking like so many

rectangular diamonds, filled the revealed section.

No one noticed Sulu put a hand to his head, and he covered the gesture of weakness quickly. McCoy and Spock moved down the ranked glass caskets while Kirk followed curiously. Agmar and his four companions remained in place, watching. Presumably this necrophilic display held no surprises for them.

The leader of the aliens gestured with a limb. There was a hint of sadness in his voice.

"Our people, Captain Kirk."

Each individual sarcophagus was nearly ten meters high. A single gigantic body filled every crystal coffin. And each of the immobile forms was covered from head to root with a covering of thick green bristle.

They had no recognizable heads, not even of the kind Agmar and his friends had. Instead, at the top end of each shape was a mass that looked something like an artichoke. But under the bristle, Kirk and the other crewmen could see that the actual bodies were composed of the same furry ropelike extensions, also bunching up tightly near the base and spreading out into footlike protrusions. In this respect they were identical to Agmar. And there were other resemblances between the living Phylosians and these embalmed giants.

It was an impressive and rather chilling sight.

Eventually Spock looked up from his tricorder. "Nerve tissue mass is exceptionally high. Readings indicate these beings utilized almost seventy percent of their brain capacity—a very high ratio."

Kirk turned and looked back at Agmar. "Your early ancestors."

"No," replied the Phylosian, "only the generation before us." He bowed slightly.

"Then what happened?" Kirk prodded. "I never heard of such enormous physiological changes taking place in such a short span of time."

Agmar's voice was matter-of-fact.

"A human came to Phylos."

II

Kirk hesitated. It was too late to back out of the question now. "You mean a humanoid?"

The eyestalks were angled directly at him. "No, a human—like you, Captain. You remarked on the reaction of humans to the poisons and antidotes of our world. Such things can operate both ways, Captain James Kirk.

"The human, quite unintentionally, brought sickness and death with him—mostly death. But instead of running away, of taking flight and leaving us, he remained and worked to try and save us from the very disease he had carried."

McCoy gestured with his medical 'corder. "It adds up, Jim." He nodded at the silent sarcophagi, "The bodies all show evidence of gram-positive bacteria. It's carried by humanoids without ill effect, but preliminary readings taken when we first landed indicate that Staphylococcus strains aren't native to this world. It must have been like the worst plague imaginable."

"We had no way of knowing what was destroying us," confirmed Agmar. "That, I think, was the most horrible thing of all to our forebears."

"*Was*," McCoy echoed. "You were alive then?"

"Very young we were and barely formed, but yes, we remember that time."

"Then how? . . ." Kirk paused. There was a new sound in the room. He thought he'd heard it before, somewhere. Something like wings flapping.

There was a louder sound, and he looked upwards. A rush of air slammed at his face and he ducked instinctively. He got the impression of something streaking past just in front of his nose.

The creature didn't fly away. It remained hovering overhead, circling in the still air of the corridor. The intruder was a good twelve feet long. It's segmented body was hinged

in the middle and the upper half would swing awkwardly from side to side.

Despite the flapping sound, the beast had no wings. In place of them, a pair of thick coils protruded from the body. The creature dipped slightly and the coils contracted, kicking the floating monster powerfully upwards once more. It repeated this maneuver regularly.

The constant contractions produced the flapping sounds. Those coils looked taut as steel and reminded Kirk of something much less benign than a bird's wings.

"Plant life, Captain," Spock informed him. "If there are animals here they are surely scarce. These creatures appear both primitive and aggressive."

Abruptly, the whooshing sound was repeated as the thing dove again at Kirk. He took a couple of halting steps to one side and dodged just in time. Out came his phaser, down went the trigger, and . . .

Nothing happened.

He tried again. Nothing. The phaser wasn't putting out enough heat to warm a piece of old toast.

"Your phasers!" Spock, Sulu, McCoy, and the two security men tried their own weapons.

"They won't work on any setting, sir!" said Sulu nervously.

"To insure the preservation of the forebears there is a weapons deactivator in effect here," Agmar told them. "Your destructive devices will not work."

McCoy yelled a warning. "It seems to be after you, Jim!"

"Weapons deactivator," Kirk murmured, keeping a careful eye on the darting movements of the, well, swooper was an apt term. "Then *this* should work." He pulled out his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise* . . . Kirk to . . ."

It might as well have been an invitation. Suddenly the hall was filled with the big creatures. They didn't appear out of the walls, but they seemed to.

Half a dozen of them immediately ensnarled Kirk, before he could complete the call. He struggled, and the communicator bounced to the floor.

"Captain!" Sulu shouted. The others moved toward him and drew their own attackers.

Spock was enveloped quickly. Something fell from his pocket—the tape cassette he'd picked up earlier. No one saw it fall—certainly not Digard and Ush, who were busy with attackers of their own.

Meanwhile Kirk was fighting back with plenty of vim, and absolutely no effect. Something knocked his legs out from under him and he found himself pinned to the floor like a trapped butterfly. He struck out with a hand, contacted nothing. The darn things were quick as well as strong.

It was over as soon as it had begun. Kirk, Sulu, and the others lay motionless on the ground, held tightly in the grasp of dozens of swoopers.

Sulu, who appeared to have recovered from one attack just in time to succumb to another, looked over at Kirk.

"What to you think they have in mind for us, sir?" Kirk didn't answer his helmsman. Instead, his attention was riveted on action overhead.

"Something tells me we've just been the prize suckers for a diversionary assault. Look!" Other eyes went upward, to see Spock, totally enmeshed in swooper coils, being flown 'round the bend near the building's entrance.

Another shape intruded on Kirk's vision and stared down at him quietly. If anything, Agmar's attitude was apologetic.

"I am sorry for this deception, Captain Kirk. But there was no other way."

It was Kirk's task to remain patient and understanding of alien mores. Right now, however, he'd have taken considerable pleasure in soaking Agmar and his fellows in oil and vinegar and tossing them to death.

He wrenched with all his strength at the bar on his right arm, but the swooper coil encircling his upper torso was as unyielding as an anaconda.

"What are you babbling about, Agmar? What are those things going to do with Spock?"

"He has been chosen to serve a great cause," the Phylosian intoned reverently. "The Master has waited many years, searched many visitors, studied many nearby worlds in hopes

of finding a specimen like Spock. It is good." Agmar raised a loose fold of himself skyward.

The swoopers immediately released Kirk and his companions—reluctantly, it seemed—and took off at top speed down the big hall, melting away into hidden corridors and side panels like a cloud of bats in a cathedral.

"And now," continued Agmar, "all the worlds of the galaxy will share in total peace and harmony!"

There was, of course, a time and a place for anything . . . including a little educative violence. At the moment Kirk felt like sharing peace and harmony about as much as he did partying with the Phylosians.

He climbed slowly to his feet and approached Agmar with just such unharmonizing thoughts in mind. The eyestalks would be a good place to begin, he decided.

"So help me, Agmar, if you don't tell me where Spock is, I'll . . ."

He broke off as an enormous shadow spread across the room. It wasn't a swooper. Kirk looked up. The sight was at once more familiar and more alien than any they had yet encountered on this greenhouse world.

Standing in the doorway was a human male. He was perfectly normal in every way save one; he stood just under twenty-four feet.

He wasn't smiling.

There was a movement immediately in front of the landing party, and Kirk lowered his gaze. Agmar and his four associates had fallen to their knees—or knee-substitutes—before the giant. It was the most humanlike gesture they'd yet made. The implications of the movement were appalling.

McCoy had the presence of mind to activate the medical tricorder at the giant's entrance.

"Praise to the Master!" the five Phylosians chorused dutifully. "All praise and adoration to the Restorer, the Master, our Savior!"

"Another plant?" Kirk asked quietly. This one would be hard to swallow.

But McCoy's 'corder insisted that in this case, at least, appearances were not deceiving.

"No, it's definitely human, Jim. That explains that first unusual reading I picked up." Further explanation was soon provided by the giant himself.

"I AM DR. STAVOS KENICLIUS #5," the giant boomed. He wore only a short pair of pants and several instruments. A cane or walking stick the size of a small pine was clasped in his right hand, "WELCOME TO PHYLOS, CAPTAIN KIRK."

"No thanks, Keniclius. Yours is the second welcome we've received here and I'm getting sick of them. I don't want any more of this world's hellos."

"DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU DO WANT, CAPTAIN KIRK?"

"You bet I do. Where's Mr. Spock?"

"THAT IS NO LONGER ANY CONCERN OF YOURS, CAPTAIN." The giant took two strides toward them, "HE IS MINE, NOW. MORE IMPORTANTLY, THE ESSENCE OF HIM IS MINE. I HAVE WAITED FOR MR. SPOCK A LONG TIME . . . TOO LONG TO CONSIDER GIVING HIM UP.

"RETURN TO YOUR SHIP."

He bent and picked up the communicator. It looked like a toy in his massive palm. He tossed it contemptuously to Kirk, who caught it automatically.

"HERE IS YOUR COMMUNICATIONS DEVICE. GO BACK TO YOUR SHIP."

"Not without my first officer." The two men glared at each other.

If Spock had been present he'd undoubtedly have advised against a confrontation between Kirk and a man four times his size and more so in weight.

Kirk might have thought of it himself, except that he was subject to human traits which did not trouble Mr. Spock. Right now, for example, he was too mad to consider the situation dispassionately.

"I AM SORRY, CAPTAIN. YOU WILL LEAVE NOW OR SUFFER THE CONSEQUENCES." He made a gesture with one hand.

A flock—no, a crop—of swoopers came darting into the chamber again. Pausing overhead like a swarm of organic helicopters, they circled back and forth over the knot of watching humans. Their hinged bodies jerked in the middle, twitching nervously from side to side.

Dropping his gaze, McCoy happened to notice the tiny tape cartridge Spock had dropped earlier. He bent and picked it up, slipping it without undue motion into a pocket. His caution was unnecessary. Both Keniclius and the Phylosians had their attention focused wholly on Kirk.

The object of their study stood fuming silently. He was frustrated, angry, and almost mad enough to take on the huge Keniclius despite their difference in size.

But he'd already had one very enlightening experience with swoopers and their abilities while they were operating under external restraint. He had no illusions about the outcome if Keniclius let them run loose.

For now, then, they had only one choice. He flipped open the communicator and raised it slowly to his lips. There was always the chance that either Keniclius or the Phylosians were thought sensitives. No, if that were the case they should have fallen dead from reading his thoughts several minutes ago.

"Kirk to *Enterprise*," he repeated. "Chief Kyle? Beam us up."

Kyle was smiling when they materialized normally in the transporter room. His smile turned to a worried frown. It deepened as the little party exited the alcove. He made a frantic grab for certain controls.

Kirk took a moment to reassure him. "Easy, Chief, you haven't lost Mr. Spock."

"Well, then," the transporter chief replied, searching the room, "where is he?"

"Out of reach of your transporter, I'm afraid. For the moment. But you might keep hunting for him. Try the transporter on his pattern every now and then in the area of our touchdown point. There's always the chance something down there will get lazy, or move him, and you'll suddenly be able to bring him aboard."

"The power drain, sir," began Kyle, but Kirk cut him off.

"We have plenty of power, Mr. Kyle," he said as he headed for the elevator, "but a distinct shortage of Mr. Spock. Try at five minute intervals."

"Aye, sir," Kyle agreed uncertainly. His acknowledgment barely beat the closing doors.

Kirk held a small, quick conference to explain the situation to those principal officers who'd remained on board. It was a solemn group of men and women who stared expectantly back at him when he'd concluded.

"Uhura, you'll have to take over the library computer station in Mr. Spock's absence. Lieutenant M'ress will manage communications for you."

"Yes, sir."

"I want you to use the library to dig for two things, Lieutenant." He ticked them off on his fingers. "One, any record extant of a form of plant life of extraordinary intelligence and a technology so advanced they don't bother to boast of it by visiting inhabited worlds.

"And two—I want you to check into the one hope we have in all this."

"Hope, Jim?" McCoy looked puzzled. Kirk only smiled back confidently.

"A giant who is fool enough or megalomaniac enough to tell us who he is." He looked back at Uhura.

"A human named Keniclius—Stavos Keniclius. Said individual may or may not be entitled to the label of doctor." Uhura nodded and moved rapidly to the library station. Seconds later its console was a Christmas tree of blinking lights.

"Sulu, you and Arex get to work with the ship's main sensors. See if you can locate Spock or Keniclius. And Sulu, see if you can program some sensors to differentiate the Phylosians from the lesser plant life. They're probably the only other intelligent life forms on the planet." Both helmsmen moved to their stations and began to work swiftly.

That left only McCoy.

"Sorry I can't help, Jim."

"You can, Bones." Kirk slumped in the command chair. "While Uhura, Sulu, and Arex are running checks, you can get yourself down to Sick Bay and find me a nonnarcotic, nonenervating tranquilizer. If I don't relax soon I'm going to start breaking things. And I haven't got time for a trip to the therapy chamber." McCoy grinned.

"I'll see what I can find, Jim."

He wasn't gone long. And by the time the mild relaxer had taken effect. Kirk was able to speak with more patience and listen with a little of the same. Inside, though, he was still seething.

"Anything at all, Mr. Sulu?" The helmsman shook his head.

"We haven't been able to pick up anything like a humanoid life-reading, sir. And it's not because they're attempting to decoy or divert our probes—there's no evidence of any surface interference. Spock and Keniclius must be somewhere our sensor scans can't penetrate."

"Outstanding news," Kirk grumbled. "What about the Phylosians?"

"It was hard to calibrate for an intelligent plant form, sir. We're registering thousands of botanical readings in the city, including the swoopers, which have a definite pattern. But no sign of anything higher. Nothing that might be Agmar or his friends." Kirk frowned, thinking. "Agmar said something about a weapons deactivator in operation in at least one of their buildings . . . but nothing about its range or limitations. Let's find out. Mr. Sulu, lock ship's phasers on that laboratory building we first entered. Wide area stun setting."

Sulu manipulated controls. "Ready, sir."

"Just a minute." Kirk turned to face Uhura. "Lieutenant, how are you coming on information about Keniclius?"

"There's nothing current, Captain." She looked disappointed. "I think I may be getting something from the biography section of the recent history bank, but it'll take a moment or two, yet."

"All right, Lieutenant. Keep at it.

"Fire phasers, Mr. Sulu." Sulu hit the proper switch.

"Firing, sir."

A beam of pure energy erupted from the bowfront of the *Enterprise*. Instantly it disrupted orderly molecules, surprised combinations of oxygen, nitrogen, carbon, and a host of others as it speared down through the atmosphere of Phylos.

Nothing could stand before that paralyzing beam, powered by the space-warping engines of the great starship. Nothing solid—

Sulu was staring into a gooseneck viewer. Now he turned to look back at Kirk.

"No effect, Captain. Nothing at all. Phaser stun was neutralized at . . ." He paused and checked another gauge set into the console near the viewer, "A distance of approximately one thousand meters above the target area. Should I try a stronger setting?"

"No." Kirk drummed his fingers on an arm of the command chair, and thought.

"I suspect it either wouldn't have any effect at all, Mr. Sulu, or else it would break through and destroy anything it touched—Mr. Spock, too. That means that either way our weapons are effectively useless. All right. We'll have to go back down there and rescue Mr. Spock without them."

"The old oriental martial arts are kind of a hobby with me, Captain," said Sulu. He smiled faintly. "But I don't think hands and feet will work too well against those swoopers."

What, exactly, is a flash of genius?

Mental stimulation. A concatenation of cerebral crosscurrents. The fusion of one particle of cause with another of effect which—once in a while, just once in a while—produces a molecule of solution.

But all McCoy said was, "I think there might be something we can use that'd be more effective, Sulu." A crooked smile crossed his face. "I'm just not sure which section—"

"If you've got any suggestions at all, Bones—" By way of reply, McCoy leaned close and whispered in Kirk's ear. The Captain's expression grew by turns amused, disbelieving, and finally determined.

"Where'd you get an idea like that, Bones?"

McCoy looked grimly pleased. "From Agmar."

"I don't know—" Kirk mused. "I see what you mean about 'which section.' " Turning suddenly he hit an armrest switch, spoke into the broadcast grid.

"Kirk to engineering. Scotty?" The chief engineer's filtered voice replied from the other end of the starship.

"Here, sir."

"Scotty, I've got a priority project for you. Who's your weapon's specialist?"

"That'd be Lieutenant Chatusram, sir."

"Get him. I've got some special equipment I want you to make up—and I want it yesterday."

The special equipment was basically very simple. McCoy had no trouble conveying what was needed over the intercom. Nor, according to Chatusram, would it be difficult to make.

"I don't think we'll have any problems with the actual construction, Captain," explained the weaponsmith, "though some of the nonsolid components may take some time to compose. The ingredients are simple, but the combination required is not. Still, I'm sure my staff and I can manage it."

"Good for you, 'Ram," said Kirk. "Mr. Scott, see that the lieutenant gets all the help he needs."

"Aye, Captain."

"How soon, Lieutenant?" Chatusram's reply was cautious, but confident.

"I believe if the basic mechanical components are in stock, within the hour, Captain."

"That'll have to do. Hop to it, gentlemen. Kirk out" He ended the discussion.

It was Uhura's turn to speak. She's been waiting impatiently throughout the cross-ship conversation and now she broke in before anyone else could demand Kirk's attention.

"I have the requested information on the man identified as Stavos Keniclius, sir. I'll put the statistics and what visuals there are on the main screen."

"Thank you, Uhura." Kirk turned back to McCoy. "Bones, you really think this gadget of yours will work? It seems almost too simple."

"I can think of several reasons why it should, Jim. That's one of them. Another is what Agmar said that gave me the idea in the first place. The clincher is that, way back when, my great-granddaddy had the finest garden in metropolitan North-South America." Kirk nodded and looked to the viewscreen.

The screen lit, and the feminine computer voice of the *Enterprise* sounded over the speaker.

"Working."

"Here it comes, sir," said Uhura. Almost before she finished, a portrait had appeared on the screen.

There were some slight differences—the figure in the portrait was slightly older, for example—but Kirk. McCoy, and Sulu recognized Keniclius's features immediately.

More revealing was the accompanying statistical chart, especially those figures which declared that the man shown was a normal human of about the same height and weight as Kirk.

While they studied the printout, the computer voice supplied additional information.

"Drawn from recent-near-recent Earth history file, category scientists, male, subheading iconoclasts . . . Keniclius, Stavos. Terran physiologist-physicist period Eugenics Wars. Specialist in eugenics and manipulative endocrinology. Noted for plan to clone perfect humanoid prototype as founder of idealized 'master race' to act as galactic peacekeepers. Concept evaluated by ruling government of time and formally rejected as, quote, 'too antihumanistic.'

"Experiments persisted despite governmental decree. Upon discovery of continuance of illegal research, Keniclius banned from terran community. Voluntarily accepted total exile and vanished into an uncharted region of space. Cursory search initiated. No body found, no official death certificate issued—"

The computer droned on, pouring out additional information. Most of it was trivial, peripheral and, more importantly, downright unhelpful. There was nothing that might be employed as a psychological weapon against the giant below.

But they'd pegged Keniclius, all right.

"No further data," the computer concluded. Voice and visual display disappeared together. Then McCoy spoke.

"Wasn't there an old story about a modern Diogenes roaming the galaxy in search of someone special?"

"Someone special," Kirk muttered. He looked up. "A perfect someone. Someone special to begin the ideal race, yes, I've

heard that story too, Bones, as a child."

"That's just it, Jim. This can't be *the* Keniclius. He'd have to be over two hundred and fifty years old!"

"The original Keniclius, yes," Kirk noted. "Keep in mind what the library just told us. What was he banned for?"

Understanding lit McCoy's eyes. "I remember now. He said he was Keniclius 5. My God, he's gone and cloned *himself*, to carry on his search! And his clones have re-cloned themselves, right on down the line," He shook his head, an expression of mixed distaste and admiration.

"At least we're not dealing with a complete megalomaniac," Kirk added. "If we were, he'd long ago have decided that *he* was the 'perfect specimen' all along. Then we'd be faced with an army of giants instead of just one."

"I'll grant that in his favor," admitted McCoy reluctantly, "but by the same token, Jim, he's not going to be an easy man to talk out of his dreams . . ."

III

Forty-two point one five minutes later (ship-time), Kirk, McCoy, Sulu, and Chief Engineer Scott assembled in the main transporter room. Scott carried three small traveling bags in his arms. He handed them out to his fellow officers while Kirk tried to regard the upcoming attempt with a detached air.

"It's seems incredible that a man could take a few cells from his body and successfully reproduce himself time after time. Yet that seems to be the kind of disturbed genius we're dealing with in Dr. Keniclius and his oversized successors."

At the moment, however, Sulu had other things on his mind than the astonishing feats—biological or otherwise—of their giant antagonist. Most of his worries concerned the untested quantity resting in the leather carry-bag. He hefted it and tapped the contents. It responded with a faint metallic ring.

"I just hope these things work, that's all."

"Oh, they'll work all right, Lieutenant," Scott assured him. "The equipment's simple enough—foolproof, in fact. Chatusram and I saw to that. But I admit I've got my own doubts about the stuff they contain. I've heard of some mighty strange ways to fight aliens, but—"

"These are mighty strange aliens we're fighting, Scotty." Kirk moved into the transporter alcove. "As soon as Dr. McCoy, Mr. Sulu, and I have beamed down," he told the chief engineer, "I want you to leave orbit and—"

"Leave orbit, sir?"

Kirk nodded. "If they think we've gone, I have a hunch they'll stop scanning the area around their still-functioning structures. On any other world in a similar situation it would be standard precautionary procedure to keep scanners on. But the Phylosians do whatever Keniclius tells them to do, and this mutant is so confident of his own power—he's been a virtual god for so long—he won't think any mere humans like us will dare defy him.

"He's been out of touch with humanity too long to be anything but contemptuous of it. Not that I can blame him, considering what some of us were like during the Eugenics Wars. Give us thirty minutes on the surface, Scotty, and then circle back."

"All right," the chief engineer reluctantly agreed. "But if I may be permitted an opinion, sir . . . I dinna like it."

"Neither do I." Kirk made sure he was well inside the perimeter of the transporter disk. "But without phasers or any other modern weapon, we'll need all the surprise we can muster. If the ship seems to leave, we might get it."

McCoy and Sulu joined him in the chamber. He turned to look at the waiting chief Kyle.

"Energize."

The three men became three drifting masses of lambent color. Then they were gone.

Scott stared into the empty chamber for a moment, became aware that Kyle was watching him.

"Well, what are you starin' at, Kyle?"

"Nothing, Chief. I—"

"See that you don't do it again."

"Yes, sir."

Scott stalked off toward the elevator doors. He'd have to officially assume command now—and it would be he who would have to issue the unpopular retreat order.

Life was dreadfully unfair sometimes!

Three glittering cylinders resumed human shape on a street of the Phylosian metropolis. Sulu was checking his tricorder as soon as they'd fully rematerialized. He kept the mysterious leather bag tucked tightly under one arm.

"No indication of a scan, sir," he said finally. "I don't think they know we're here. Unless—"

"No," Kirk sighed gratefully. "That kind of subtlety is beyond Keniclius. If he knew we were back he'd show up roaring biblical pronouncements, or send a crop of those toothy fliers. Let's get a move on."

Kirk took two steps and started to turn the corner around the thin tower they'd set down next to . . . and almost walked straight into a flight of the just-mentioned swoopers.

Flattening themselves against the curving wall in the convenient shadow of the glass edifice, they barely breathed as the swarm of powerful carnivores sailed past.

"I'm not sure I can take too much of this," McCoy finally gasped. "Watch those predictions, Jim. Why'd you take me anyway, instead of Arex or a couple of security personnel?"

"You ought to know better than that, Bones. We don't know what kind of shape we'll find Spock in."

"If we find him," murmured McCoy.

"Let's not even think about that, hmm?"

Sulu looked up from his tricorder and tried to inject a more hopeful note. "I wouldn't worry too much about those swoopers, Doctor. They seem to be almost mindless. They attack primarily as a reflex action."

"Out of sight, out of mind, is that it?" McCoy grunted. The helmsman nodded.

"The way is clear now, Captain."

They turned the corner without being challenged. Moving at a smooth trot, they headed for the laboratory building.

Once, a tiny dandelionlike plant tried to follow Sulu. It took Kirk and McCoy several minutes to catch up with the sprinting lieutenant. Other than the single fuzzy, they encountered nothing ambulatory.

They'd materialized in a different section of the city than the first time. If only they'd landed here initially, events might have taken a different course. But that was wishful thinking. They turned another corner.

Came up short.

"I don't believe it," Sulu murmured.

"Incredible," was the only word Kirk could think of. McCoy just stared.

They were standing close by the entrance to a colossal, hangarlike building. The structure was easily a couple of kilometers long. Inside, ranged neatly in double rows, were

hundreds of translucent, milky, teardrop shapes, each dozens of yards high.

In the immediate foreground were the five Phylosians. Each rose on a small, automatic lifting platform. They were working at the teardrop shapes, cleaning them, scraping and pulling a thick mossy growth from their sides.

"What else could they be but ships, Jim?"

Kirk agreed. "Looks like they're getting ready to go on a trip, too. But where? To what purpose?"

"By the number of ships here I'd say a mass migration is being planned—or invasion."

"Agmar insisted they were a peaceful people," Sulu put in.

"Oh, sure!" spat McCoy sarcastically. "We've had ample evidence of that, haven't we? 'Peaceful' has almost as many definitions as love, Mr. Sulu."

"Is that a clinical opinion, Doctor?"

"Ease off, you two," warned Kirk. "We'll probably have a definition supplied, soon enough." He looked thoughtful. "But you've got a point, Bones. These ships, this city—I'm not saying the motives and abilities of a vegetable civilization would be so different from ours, but let's not jump to any conclusions. This is the first one we've encountered."

"And the last, I hope," the doctor muttered. He added, half to himself, "I always did hate vegetables as a kid. Now I know I had a good reason."

"And that's about enough hilarity, Bones. If Spock were here he wouldn't be laughing."

"Sorry, Jim." McCoy turned serious once again. "I'd almost forgotten why we're here." He nodded in the direction of the gigantic hangar. "Those ships look like they've never left the ground. Probably they were all set to leave, when Keniclius the first arrived and his new diseases swept the planet."

Kirk nodded, glanced at Sulu. "Any indication of Keniclius's or Mr. Spock's whereabouts?"

Sulu checked the tricorder, looked disappointed. "They're not around here, sir. Certainly not in the hangar. I read only the Phylosians."

"Umm. Well, followers can be led. Maybe we can be as persuasive as Keniclius."

Moving from wall to wall and taking care to conceal themselves well, they gradually made their way to the entrance of the enormous structure.

It appeared that each Phylosian was taking care of one ship by himself. That was fine with Kirk. It would make the momentary disappearance of one of their number less obvious to the others.

Agmar was working close by. At the moment he was filling the tank of his lifter with some sort of cleaning fluid from huge canisters stacked neatly against the near wall. Taking up positions behind these, the three men waited for the leader of the Phylosians to return.

Two others came and filled their tanks before McCoy whispered tensely, "Here he comes!"

"Do we want the flitter he's riding?" asked Sulu hurriedly. Kirk shook his head.

"Might take too long to figure the controls. I'd rather stay on the ground anyway. It might be subject to outside orders. I don't want someone yanking my feet out from under me a couple of hundred meters up in the air."

Agmar brought the little vehicle down smoothly to the canisters. His back was to them. They tackled him without any trouble.

Sulu and Kirk were momentarily repulsed at handling a creature who felt like a clump of sticky straw. They almost lost control of the struggling alien.

Fortunately, McCoy was used to handling things that would turn many men squeamish. He wasn't at all bothered by the unconventional feel of the Phylosian. He hung on tightly until Kirk and Sulu had recovered from the initial shock of contact.

They had no difficulty dragging him back behind the high containers. Kirk's only worry had been the chance that the repair flitter might be fitted with some kind of automatic alarm that would relay back to Keniclius. But there was no sign that anything of the sort existed. A moment's consideration and he realized there was no need to be concerned.

The little repair vehicle had shown a tendency to take off again. But once they'd removed its sole passenger, it stopped and now floated patiently in place.

"Agmar," began Kirk quietly, "we don't want to hurt you. You claim you're a peaceful people. Well, we're an easygoing race, too, we humans. But we must have Spock back. If this means using crude physical force against you, then rest assured we'll do so."

Agmar was not impressed. Nor was he arrogant. More than anything else his attitude smacked of resigned indifference. If he was startled to see the humans again, he didn't show it.

"I do not think that is possible," he said blandly, "The Vulcan-human blend of wisdom, sense of order, durability, reason, and strength is the finest the Master has ever found. We are pleased Spock will carry on our work."

"Patrick O'Morion!" Sulu gasped, The whole situation had been turned upside down and a new light now gleamed on its backside.

"Carry on *your* work?" was all Kirk could stutter.

"We are the last of a dying race on a dying world, Captain," intoned Agmar. A limb that remained unpinned gestured towards the ships.

"Once, we had a great mission. Then the disease destroyed nearly all of us. We five are the frail remnant of that race, the inheritors of that purpose.

"And we are sterile. We cannot put out spores. When we go, there will be no more of our kind."

"This great plan, this mission of yours," probed McCoy. "What happens to it if something happens to Spock—or to the Master?"

It was Agmar's turn to be put off-stride and confused. He recovered quickly, utilizing the response that all "masters" engender in their subjects.

"There will always be a Master. But come, you are worried about your friend, and that is needless, I assure you. I will show you that he is safe and in good condition. Better than you can guess."

He wriggled out of their relaxing grasp and shuffled into the hangar. Kirk and the others hesitated, then followed.

"Just like that, Captain?" asked Sulu. Kirk was thinking furiously, trying to stay one mental step ahead of Agmar. Yet, who could tell how the Phylosians saw things?

"Yes, just like that, Mr. Sulu. All the same, keep that bag handy." By way of emphasis he hefted his own.

"No tricks now, Agmar." The Phylosian didn't reply. He leaned forward and pressed a button on the console of the flitter.

Rapidly, the other four joined them. They dismounted from their own repair craft. Then the five moved together to stop before what looked like a solid, blank wall.

"The way is through here, gentlemen," said Agmar. He moved forward. In doing so, Kirk noticed that he stepped on a circular section of floor that was slightly different in color from the rest. Immediately, the wall slid aside to reveal a huge metallic iris behind it.

Agmar moved again and stepped on a second odd-hued round area. Now the iris dilated. An enormous tunnel appeared, a gaping wound in the earth. Its floor was smooth and sloped gently downward, under the city.

Kirk could just make out another iris far away down the tunnel. A second later it, too, opened.

Beyond was only endless blackness.

Agmar and his fellows started into the tunnel. Kirk did not follow immediately. Nor did McCoy or Sulu. That bottomless hole looked awfully dark.

Agmar turned. "We sprang from the soil, Captain," he said reassuringly. "These tunnels are part of our ancient home." He drew a flat disk from his middle. It was somewhat larger than a voder. He did something to one side of the disk, and it suddenly put out a brilliant beam of light.

"This will serve to show our way." He turned and started down the tunnel.

Kirk wasn't keen on following, but they didn't have much choice. Beating up an already willing Agmar was a poor alternative to what appeared to be acquiescence.

"Once more into the breech," muttered McCoy.

There was more than one tunnel, they soon saw. More than two, than three. After a short walk they'd already passed

dozens of intersecting corridors, a veritable labyrinth of passageways cutting through the earth beneath the city.

Sulu was busy with his tricorder.

"No wonder we couldn't detect Spock or Keniclius with shipboard scanners, Captain. Our sensor beams couldn't penetrate here."

"Absurd," McCoy objected, observing their surroundings. "It must have been interference of some kind. These walls don't look thick enough."

"Perhaps not, Doctor," admitted Sulu. "But according to tricorder analysis they're composed of artificial elements some six hundred times denser than lead, in addition to a surface force field." He shook his head wonderingly. "I can only guess at the kind of foundation they must sit on."

"On the other hand—" continued McCoy as though he'd never doubted the walls' shielding ability.

They hadn't been walking much longer before something else caught Kirk's attention. He whispered to McCoy.

"Do you hear something?"

"What, Jim?"

"I'm not sure." Kirk's brow furrowed in concentration.

"Not much further now, Captain," came Agmar's voice from just ahead.

"There it is again!" Kirk gave a sudden start and stopped, his voice rising. "A flapping sound . . ."

That was the signal for light to leave the tunnel, and illumination of another sort to set in. They found themselves standing helplessly in blackness as black as the deepest sleep.

They'd been tricked again.

He shouted, "Use your belt lights!"

"They don't operate," replied Sulu nervously. "I've already tried."

"Agmar!" Kirk yelled angrily. "Agmar! . . ."

Agmar didn't answer.

Now McCoy and Sulu also recognized the uneven, beating sounds of the approaching swoopers. In the confined darkness of the tunnel it sounded like a growing storm. Most

men are willing to face a certain amount of danger in normal circumstances.

But in the dark!

The hardest thing was to resist the urge to go charging off into nothingness, to run blindly away from the threatening noise. They might crash into a wall or, worse, there might be vertical shafts in the underground maze as well as horizontal.

They hadn't seen any pits on the way in, however. At worst it would be a quick death, a clean death. With Kirk, to think was to act.

"Run! We've got to find some light. We can't do anything unless we can see what we're fighting. Keep your hands out and feel for the walls. And keep talking—stay together!" Kirk moved away, starting in the direction he thought they'd been going.

"This way!" Then he broke into a run. McCoy and Sulu were close by. They didn't have to keep talking to stay aware of each other's position—footsteps and increasingly heavy breathing solved that.

The same sounds might also reveal their location to any pursuers, but Kirk suspected that whatever was chasing them could find them easily enough in the dark anyway.

"Don't stop!" His voice echoed like thunder down the tunnel. "DON'T STOP . . . Don't Stop . . . don't stop . . ."

All of a sudden it sounded like they were leaving the alien cacophony further behind.

"We're gaining on them," he panted.

"Jim, up ahead!" Kirk squinted at McCoy's shout. Sure enough, there did seem to be a pinpoint of light off in the distance.

"I see it . . . I see it . . . keep going!" There couldn't be light where there was no light—that was one kind of mirage man hadn't encountered yet.

Sulu had slipped slightly behind. Unconsciously, they'd changed into the most practical order for running—McCoy barely in the lead, with Kirk in the middle and Sulu, the youngest and freshest runner, bringing up the rear.

The change from the blackness of the tunnel to the light of the room was overpowering. It was like waking up in the glare

of a flashlight. They were momentarily blinded and stumbled to a halt.

The underground chamber they'd emerged into was roughly circular in shape and the by-now expected four times human size. Two other entrances gaped in the walls, leading off to unknown regions. Controls and flashing panels lined the walls.

A long table sat in the center of the room, surrounded by an attached series of fragile-looking, semitransparent crystalline globes. These formed a sparkling corona for the platform. All were connected to each other and to the delicate instrumentation built into the table.

On the table lay Mr. Spock.

McCoy hesitated just long enough to unhitch his medical tricorder before sprinting forward. Kirk and Sulu followed.

McCoy took a hurried preliminary reading from the motionless form. He checked the results, reset frantically and made another, slower pass. His eyes were wild when he finally looked over at Kirk and Sulu.

"Something's affecting his brain. All other bodily functions are normal, but he's dying."

"IT IS TOO LATE, CAPTAIN KIRK!"

They whirled as that rolling voice exploded off surrounding walls. Keniclius 5 towered over them, staring down at the tiny intruders from one of the other entrances.

"IN A LITTLE WHILE YOUR FRIEND WILL BE GONE . . . IN A WAY. BUT AS KENICLIUS 1 LIVES ON IN EACH OF HIS CLONES, SO WILL MR. SPOCK. BEHOLD, GENTLEMEN, THE DAWNING OF A NEW ERA . . . THE SALVATION OF A GALAXY . . . SPOCK 2!"

He made a grandiose gesture toward the third portal. Again Kirk, McCoy, and Sulu turned.

Another huge figure had appeared there. It had a familiar detached look, sharply peaked ears, oddly arched eyebrows. It was Mr. Spock, four times over.

His expression was not unfriendly. But neither did the giant show signs of recognition at the appearance of his shipmates, nothing to give the three officers a surge of hope.

They had only the single moment to register shock before the sounds of their tunnel pursuers grew suddenly very loud.

"Get ready!" Kirk ordered.

Now the contents of the mysterious leather sacks were revealed as the three men drew out filtering masks and slipped them over their heads. Kirk tugged the protective bag off his own device.

It was a slim cylinder with one slightly flared end. Several small nozzles protruded from that end, while the opposite sported a handhold and control knob. McCoy began fitting the fourth mask over the supine face of Spock 1.

"WEAPONS DEACTIVATORS ARE IN OPERATION HERE, TOO, CAPTAIN KIRK. A LAST CHANCE—RETURN TO YOUR SHIP."

That's when the tunnel exploded in a landscaper's nightmare. There were swoopers, too, scattered among a crawling, hopping, rolling collage of leafy, screaming monstrosities, offshoots of a plant kingdom gone mad.

Kirk, Sulu, and McCoy depressed the single control set in the base of their cylinders. Suddenly the room was enveloped in a thick chemical mist.

At first the gray fog hugged the floor. As it began to rise a strange expression came over the face of Keniclius 5. He started to cough roughly and retreated from the rapidly dimming room. No one noticed as Spock 2 did likewise.

Not only could Sulu not see Captain Kirk or Dr. McCoy in the drifting miasma, he couldn't see the cellulose abominations that were attacking them, either. But he could sure hear them. At which point the steady hiss that had been issuing from his cylindrical sprayer fizzled out.

He yelled into the mist. "The sprayer's empty, Captain!"

"Mine too, Jim!" came the familiar voice of McCoy. Sulu moved toward it, clinging tightly to the empty sprayer. They might be reduced to fighting with clubs after all.

He bumped into something solid and almost screamed. It was only McCoy.

"Wait a minute," came another voice, Kirk's. "Listen."

No one said a word. Sure enough, the plant noises had stopped. Not died out slowly, or faded, just . . . stopped. McCoy tried to make out shapes in the thick haze surrounding them.

"Maybe they're waiting for this to clear. This far underground, there has to be some kind of automatic air-circulation system to blow out accumulating impurities."

Sure enough the mist started to clear, thinning even as he spoke. Soon Kirk could see the two of them. They moved to stand back to back in expectation of a renewed attack. Kirk removed his mask and sniffed.

"It's okay now."

McCoy and Sulu removed theirs. The cleaning process accelerated and the mist broke up rapidly. In seconds it was completely gone.

So were most of the plants.

Those that remained behind weren't going to attack anyone ever again. They lay on the floor, limbs twisted grotesquely, shriveled like dead clumps of hedge.

"Well, how about that," McCoy mused, studying the copse-laden battlefield. "Great-grandpappy's weed spray still works."

"I'll witness that," said a relieved Kirk, "so long as those that got away don't come back."

"I don't think they'll be in a hurry to do so, Captain," observed Sulu.

"Even so, we've got to get Spock out of here before Keniclius returns. Scott should have the ship back in orbit now." He took out his communicator, activated it.

"There's a chance this shield is directional. We might be able to beam out, even if nobody can beam in. Kirk to *Enterprise* . . . Kirk to *Enterprise* . . ." There was no answering beep. He paused, tried again. No luck.

"Must be these blasted walls. Kirk to *Enterprise* . . ."

McCoy had been examining Spock ever since it appeared they were safe from counterattack. Now he looked up and shook his head slowly, sadly.

"It's no use, Jim. He's fading too fast. He'll be dead inside a quarter hour." He hesitated. "He no longer thinks. His mind is gone. But it's not the normal blankness of predeath. This machine," and he indicated the instrument-laden table, "seems to be draining him somehow."

"MORE THAN JUST DRAIN, GENTLEMEN." They turned.

Keniclius was no plant. He'd returned.

"HIS MEMORIES HAVE BEEN TRANSFERRED . . . RELOCATED INTO THE MECHANISM ITSELF AND THEN TRANSFERRED AGAIN." He moved towards them.

"I CAN DUPLICATE EXACT PHYSIOLOGICAL STRUCTURES. I CANNOT DUPLICATE THAT WHICH IS LEARNED. I CAN REPRODUCE THAT SECTION OF THE MIND WHICH HOLDS THOUGHTS, BUT I CANNOT REPRODUCE THINKING. I CAN MAKE AGAIN THE AREA THAT IS RESPONSIBLE FOR MEMORY, BUT I CANNOT CREATE MEMORIES.

"JUST AS MY PREDECESSOR TRANSFERRED HIS MEMORIES AND THOUGHTS TO ME THROUGH A SIMILAR MACHINE, SO HAVE I DONE WITH MR. SPOCK AND HIS DUPLICATE."

"You talk about your cloning as though you were creating life!" screamed a frustrated Kirk. "But you have to murder to do it!"

Unexpectedly, that appeared to affect the giant. He halted in his approach, something within him seemingly in conflict with itself. Kirk noticed the hesitation. While it seemed incredible that this monster might have some distorted sense of morality, he had to grab at any chance.

Together the three of them got hold of Spock's limp form and lifted it off the table. They started carrying him toward the third entrance.

They didn't get very far.

The second colossal figure had appeared and was blocking their retreat. Nor did the giant Spock appear inclined to move out of their way.

There was no hesitation in Kirk's voice now.

"Out of my way, mister!" he yelled at the giant. "That's an order." The huge head inclined slowly to stare blank-faced at them, but the giant showed no sign of moving. McCoy had his medical scanner out and working.

"I don't think he understands, Jim. His mind is still trying to assimilate all the fresh knowledge that's been poured into it."

That first order had come automatically. But now Kirk found himself uncertain how to proceed.

How much Mr. Spock was there in the giant towering silently over them—and how much Keniclius?

IV

On board the orbiting *Enterprise* the frustration, if not the danger, was just as intense. Wishing he had the full resources of a planet-based communications station, Scott struggled to keep his voice calm as Uhura's repeated attempts to contact the landing party met with repeated nonsuccess. He had no way of knowing, of course, that Kirk, Sulu, and Dr. McCoy were no longer on the surface of Phylos, but under it.

"Keep trying, Lieutenant. We've got to make contact with the captain."

"What do you think I've been trying to do for the past fifteen minutes, sir?" She shook her head and glared. "It's no use. I've tried every ship-to-ground frequency I can think of. No response. I can't even determine if their communicators are still operational."

"Something down there . . . either the communicators have been destroyed, or there's something awfully thick between us and them."

Scott had one card left.

"All right, Mr. Arex?" The navigation officer turned back to look at the chief engineer. "I want every ohm of power on this ship, except for the life-support systematization, put behind a tight-beam communications probe. We must try to break through whatever's blocking our communications!"

"That's fine for a simple contact, Mr. Scott," concurred Uhura. "But to maintain communication on such a power load could be disastrous. We risk total drain of our dilithium crystals. Could burn out every reserve on the ship."

"Don't I know it, lass." Of all the people on the *Enterprise* to recommend such a command, he reflected ironically, the last one ought to be her chief engineer.

"But we've left orbit as the captain requested and returned. I don't know what the situation is down below, but we should have heard from them by now. And I can't order any action until I know what the situation is. We must make contact."

Kirk slumped to the floor, sat with his head bent between his knees. The giant didn't respond to a reflex command. Now Kirk had time to think, and he found himself at a complete loss. The life of his first officer—and friend—was slipping away with every tick of the chronometer, and he seemed helpless to prevent it. Helpless.

However, circumstances often take a hand where individual decisions fail. There was a deep rumbling sound. The giant Spock was clearing his throat.

Kirk's head came up. His thoughts shifted from distant regions of remorse to the present. Maybe there was a chance.

McCoy was already taking another reading on the colossus.

"He's coming out of it, Jim. Becoming conscious and aware."

Kirk scrambled to his feet and took a step toward the giant. He stopped.

What should he say? What *could* he say? Was there really anything of the Spock he'd known in this . . . Frankenstein? Anything beyond surface features and superficial similarities? For that matter, how much of the original idealistic doctor remained in a Keniclius five times removed from the first?

Think, man, think! Say something, anything . . .

He heard his voice talking. "Spock, what is the logic of letting a man die for the sake of creating his duplicate? Explain it to me, sir, explain it to me!"

The giant raised an eyebrow, thinking, but did not respond.

"Power sources are channeled, Mr. Scott," Uhura informed him. "I hope you know what you're doing, sir."

"So do I, lass, so do I. Let's find out." Uhura turned back to her console. Her hand moved toward a certain little-used switch, the switch that was used only for expensive tight-beam communications. She'd used it before, but never with this kind of power behind it.

Would the components involved be able to handle the strain of routing the full power of the *Enterprise*? She fervently hoped so.

If not, there was a fair chance the console would explode in her face . . .

"Jim, we've got to do something!" McCoy pleaded, taking another reading on the original Spock.

"I'm trying to, really!" He eyed Spock 2. The real Spock had never been impressed by physical violence. This lumbering double would be even less so. Their only chance lay in reasoned argument.

"Look," he said desperately, "Vulcans do not condone the meaningless death of any being. Spock's death is meaningless, if its only purpose is to create a giant duplicate of himself. It's been proven time and again that no duplicate can possibly be as efficient as an original."

"IT IS NOT JUST A DUPLICATE!" objected an angry Keniclius. " 'AS GOOD AS AN ORIGINAL', INDEED! HE WILL BE FAR BETTER THAN THE ORIGINAL—THE BEGINNING OF A MASTER RACE!"

Kirk's ready reply was interrupted by a startlingly loud beep. He looked dazedly at his communicator as if it might suddenly jump off his belt and bite him. Then he unclipped it and fumbled with the activator. A better idea stopped him.

He tossed the unopened communicator to Spock 2. The giant caught it easily in one enormous palm. If the duplicate's mind was not fully operational yet, Kirk reflected, then all was lost. No amount of argument would serve.

At least its reflexes looked sound.

"That's our ship calling, Spock. You're her first officer. You answer her." The beep came again.

Raising his hand, the giant appeared to study the tiny instrument. It made no move to open it and acknowledge the now constant beeping.

"Spock's slipping, Jim," whispered McCoy tensely. "There isn't much time left."

"I'm sure we're getting through," Uhura insisted, the strain in her voice reflecting the one warping the communications equipment. "But they're not replying."

"Keep trying," ordered Scott. Uhura kept an eye on an overhead indicator. "We're nearing the overload point on the dilithium now, Mr. Scott. Our reserves . . ."

"Keep . . . trying."

Suddenly the giant's eyes seemed to clear, his expression to brighten. With the ease of one who's performed the same task a thousand times, yet also compensating for the increased size of his fingers, Spock 2 flipped open the communicator.

"COMMANDER . . . COMMANDER SPOCK HERE."

A chance, at least they had a chance, Kirk thought excitedly!

Uhura's relieved tone sounded over the communicator. "Thank heavens! Mr. Spock, tell the captain I've located additional information on Keniclius."

"Let's hear it, Lieutenant!" Kirk shouted, hoping his voice would carry far enough for the communicator mike to pick up.

Apparently it did. Uhura continued.

"I had the library research all known writings by Keniclius. Most of them border on the incoherent, but two themes stand out, especially in his last essays.

"One is his fanaticism. The other is some idea he had about using his projected master race as a peacekeeping force for the entire galaxy. That's why he needed a perfect specimen for his cloning experiments."

There was more, but a glance at the overhead indicator ruled out any further contact. Another second and the needle would dip into the red zone. She hurried.

"Signing off, power drain threshold!" She snapped off the signal and slammed down several switches with the other hand. Her sigh of relief whooshed out only after the needle had dropped out of the yellow and back into the green section of the gauge. Then she grinned up at Scott.

"That is what I call close, Mr. Scott."

"At least we know they're alive, and apparently okay," agreed Scott, in blissful ignorance. "Let's hope it was information they could use."

"Information, yeah," mused Uhura. One arm was still trembling. She leaned on it to hide the quiver. "Did I ever tell you the one about the one-legged jockey, Mr. Scott—?"

"Peacekeeping," echoed Kirk bitterly. "Peacekeeping!" He shook his head and faced Keniclius. "All this has been a waste, *Doctor* Keniclius. There's no need for any peacekeeping master race. There's been peace in the Federation now for well over fifty years."

"THAT'S A LIE!" the giant shouted, his voice washing over them, "WHAT ABOUT THE EUGENICS WARS? THE GALACTIC WARS? WHAT OF THE DEPREDATIONS OF THE ROMULANS, THE KLINGONS, AND OTHERS? NOT TO MENTION THE ENDLESS, OH, THE ENDLESS SQUABBLES AMONG THE SO-CALLED 'ALLIED' RACES OF THE FEDERATION ITSELF?

"AN ORGANIZATION OF SPOCK DUPLICATES IS NECESSARY TO FORCE THEM TO LIVE IN HARMONY—FOR THEIR OWN GOOD."

Sulu muttered, "Peace through coercion. Humanity has finally grown out of that immature philosophy, Keniclius."

"You're the fifth Keniclius," reminded Kirk. "What makes you so sure the things you see as truth aren't just old news bulletins hundreds of years out of date? Your predecessors have probably been out of touch with mankind's sociological advances for at least that long."

"That is not possible. The Master always speaks the truth," came a new voice. A new, old voice.

They turned to face the first entrance, the tunnel of horrors they'd escaped from so recently.

Agmar and his four aides stood there, watching.

"I can't understand why you've come to think of Keniclius as a 'master,' " began McCoy. "Sure, he saved you from dying—all five of you. But why should you agree with his plan for a superrace? Of what possible interest could a race of giant Spocks have for you?"

"Our fleet of ships, which you saw," Agmar replied, "was to be launched for the same purpose the Master intends. You see, there existed between our people and him a fortuitous coincidence of purpose. Disease struck us before we could carry out our own plan to impose peace on a galaxy that knew none."

"We already have peace in our Federation," snapped Kirk, "and it wasn't imposed—it was achieved from within. A real peace!" He paused.

"You have no need of Spock now. Reverse the effects of that machine and let us take him back with us."

"NO!" thundered Keniclius wildly, "THE MOLD MUST BE BROKEN." The giant's voice wavered considerably; Kirk's revelations had thrust uncertainty into two hundred fifty years of single-mindedness that had known only absolute confidence.

But it wasn't enough. The giant couldn't reverse in a moment the accumulated efforts of those two and half centuries.

McCoy was leaning over Spock 1.

"Jim, he's almost gone." Kirk thought rapidly. McCoy could do nothing. And Keniclius wouldn't. And he—he felt utterly impotent.

In fact, there was only one other being present who might be able to save Spock now. He turned to the other giant, who'd remained impassive throughout everything.

"If you have Spock's mind, you must know the Vulcan symbol called IDIC."

"INFINITE DIVERSITY IN INFINITE COMBINATION," the great form recited.

"Comprising the elements that make up truth and beauty," finished Kirk. "Tell me, could an army of giant Spocks impose Phylosian philosophy on any other creatures, in knowing defiance of the IDIC concept?"

There was a long pause as Spock 2 considered this question. Kirk held his breath.

Finally, "I DO NOT BELIEVE SO . . ." Kirk spun on the other giant.

"I thought so! Reverse the machine, Keniclius!"

"No!" yelled Agmar. It was the first violent exclamation the Phylosian had made. "Our dream must not be allowed to die!" He suddenly rushed at Kirk. His companions followed, trying to keep the humans from putting Spock 1 back on the machine.

Sulu let out a vibrant battle cry, intercepted Agmar and flipped him neatly over a shoulder. The Phylosians were at a

tremendous disadvantage in a fight with anyone who knew judo . . . they had too many limbs that could be conveniently grabbed.

But in the ensuing melee, while the three humans battled the Phylosians, Keniclius rushed the machine. The resolution of the minions had decided the confused master. He lifted a long bar of metal. It didn't really matter that none of the humans could reach him, they couldn't have stopped him anyhow.

The heavy bar smashed through one of the crystal globes encircling the table. There was a crackling electrical discharge and the giant retreated. Several other globes exploded in a shower of glass slivers and agonized internal components.

No one was hurt, but the damage was done. The lights on the sides of the machine went out—went out in the panels lining the walls. And the slight hum which had issued from inside the table faded into nothingness.

Kirk, who'd been functioning near his mental limit ever since they'd first entered the chamber and seen the dying Spock, lost all control. Despite the difference in their sizes and without really knowing what he intended, he charged Keniclius.

"Murderer! You've killed Spock!"

He never reached the giant. A leg as big around as a small tree stepped between him and Keniclius. He was forced to stop and look up into the face of Spock 2.

"TO PERSIST IN THIS BEHAVIOR, CAPTAIN, IS TO NEGATE THE ELOQUENCE OF YOUR PREVIOUS ARGUMENT. MAY I SUGGEST A MORE CONSTRUCTIVE COURSE OF ACTION?"

He walked around Kirk who, thoroughly puzzled, watched him advance on Sulu and McCoy. The two officers eased Spock 1 to the ground and backed away slowly.

Bending, the giant Vulcan lifted Spock 1 in a single hand. Thumb and forefinger touched the smaller man's forehead. Closing his own eyes the giant began a familiar chant.

"MY MIND TO YOUR MIND . . . MY THOUGHTS TO YOUR THOUGHTS . . ."

"Vulcan mind touch!" exclaimed Sulu in wonder. The chamber had become a tableau of wax figures. No one moved, everyone stared at the two Spocks. Even Keniclius,

whose inaction showed he'd never anticipated anything like this.

Gradually the giant's voice faded. Spock 1 fluttered an eyelid. It rose. There was the sound of a throat being cleared . . . softer, this time.

The larger Vulcan lowered the smaller model to the ground, facing Kirk.

"I am pleasantly surprised at your capacity for deductive reasoning, Captain," said Spock 1. "When you are not being bellicose, there appears to be no end to your arsenal of forensic talents."

Kirk, however, heard little if any of this. He'd lost control of himself again—motivated by a somewhat different reason, this time.

"Spock! You old! . . ."

"YOU NEEDN'T WORRY, CAPTAIN KIRK, ABOUT THE THREAT OF A MASTER RACE," rumbled Spock 2. All turned to look at him. "THERE WILL BE NO GALACTIC MILITIA, NO OTHER SPOCKS. THE THINGS THAT COMBINE TO MAKE SPOCK A CANDIDATE FOR SUCH A TASK ALSO WOULD NOT COUNTENANCE IT."

"BUT WHAT OF MY WORK?" queried the desperate Keniclius. "IF ALL THAT I'VE FOUGHT FOR IS ALREADY ACCOMPLISHED—THE TIMES THAT I LIVED TO END ARE ALREADY ENDED—WHAT IS TO BECOME OF ME? THERE APPEARS TO BE NO REASON WHY I SHOULD CONTINUE TO EXIST . . ."

"On the contrary, Dr. Keniclius," objected Spock 1, "I see every reason why you should remain active. Stay on Phylos with my surrogate. The concerted effort of two scientists, each with his own particular abilities and talents to enhance the other's, might yet achieve a rebirth of Phylosian civilization . . . and enable them to contribute peacefully to the Federation."

"MY THOUGHTS EXACTLY, MR. SPOCK," agreed Spock 2.

"So one might assume, Mr. Spock," agreed Spock 1.

The first officer's successful recovery had pushed all primitive revenge-thoughts from Kirk's mind.

"How does that sound to you, Dr. Keniclius? To bring life is even more important than bringing peace. If a way can be found to revitalize their race, the Phylosians have much to contribute to galactic culture."

"I . . . I WOULD BE HONORED. IF I WOULD BE ALLOWED . . . YES, YOU ARE RIGHT, CAPTAIN KIRK. THE METHODS OF THE FEDERATION HAVE INDEED CHANGED FROM WHAT I AND MY BROTHERS KNEW . . ."

"Truly, such a thing had not been thought of." Agmar looked excited and interested now. "Such a sudden change in thinking . . . it will be difficult . . ."

"You'll manage," said Kirk, too diplomatic to point out that they had no choice. He'd meant what he said. The Phylosians had some sterling qualities—once this master race business had been drummed out of them. He addressed the waiting Keniclius again.

"I'll report your *new* work here to the Federation Science center. Not only do I think they'll understand, they'll probably want to send out several crews to assist you."

And to make sure you don't get the urge to make any more giant clones of anything, he added silently.

Keniclius solemnly shook hands with each of them in turn. Then Agmar and his companions escorted Kirk, McCoy, Sulu, and Spock back to the surface.

When the men of the *Enterprise* left, the two giant scientists were already discussing plans for curing the Phylosians' sterility and expanding their knowledge of Phylosian culture.

Beaming up was uneventful, and there were the expected stolid greetings from Uhura, Kyle, Arex, and the rest of the officers—everyone carefully concealing his or her true emotions.

They entered the bridge where Scott—relieved, as usual—formally returned command to Kirk.

"Where to, Captain?" asked Sulu, back in his comfortable seat at the navigation console.

"Set a general course for the Omicron region, Mr. Sulu. I think everyone deserves an extended R & R, this time. I know I do!"

"Yes, *sir*!" Sulu responded gleefully.

"It's a good thing we were able to stop Keniclius," intoned McCoy, blatantly emphasizing the "we." "Imagine . . . a whole shipload . . . maybe a whole city . . . full of giant Spocks!"

He put on an expression of exaggerated horror while Spock looked over distastefully from his position at the library control and tried to ignore McCoy.

"What a terrifying thought! . . ." the good doctor continued, unstoppable. "Giant Spocks running all over the place! Spocks towering over helpless villages, running amuck through peaceful farmland . . . turning! . . ."

"It might be easier to stand than you, Doctor," interrupted Sulu inscrutably.

"What?" McCoy responded with outraged innocence. I'm no giant."

Kirk thought he saw an unholy gleam in Sulu's eye.

"No," the helmsman admitted, "the trouble is you never stop cloning around."

McCoy chased him all the way back to engineering.

THE MAGICKS OF MEGAS-TU

(Adapted from a script by Larry Brody)

I

Kirk really did not have the words for it. At times he had wished he'd been born with a little more of the poet in him. But after days and days of travel in which they had seen their objective grow progressively nearer, Kirk, like everyone else on board, had long since run out of superlatives. Now he was reduced to trying to relate the panorama in simple human terms.

The best description he could come up with was that it was like a soup of infinite ingredients and color. A sunsoup, a stellar gumbo.

Oh, they were all there—superhot blue-whites, blue giants, red dwarfs, supergiants, plain whites, cepheids, and irregular variables, binary and triple stars, with the younger stars predominating.

And a fair sampling of the familiar Sol-type, innocuous yet heart-breakingly familiar amid the splendor of iridescent gases and cosmic debris of all types and descriptions. No, soup seemed a thoroughly inadequate label for the center of the galaxy—but at least it didn't overwhelm. He found himself squinting as he studied the awesome panorama glowing on the main view-screen.

"Turn down the brightness, Mr. Sulu." The cluster of cosmic matter was so dense now that the cumulative brightness on the screen hurt the eyes.

"It's down all the way, sir."

"Well then, put another filter over the scope."

"Aye, sir." Sulu touched a switch. Immediately the full brilliance of the tightly packed suns, gasses, and nebulae dimmed to a bearable level.

Kirk shook his head and envied a certain section of the *Enterprise*'s crew. It was an astronomer's paradise, and in fact that section of the ship's scientific complement was working round the clock by its own choice.

Kirk, of course, was too occupied with administrative details to enjoy more than this occasional quiet study of the starscape. He sighed, pressed a well-used button on the arm of the command chair.

"Captain's Log, stardate 5524.5. For many years scientists have theorized that the galaxy was created by a great central explosion. If this was so, attendant new theories postulate that the galactic center may still be creating new matter.

"The *Enterprise* has the honor of being the first ship to attempt to penetrate to the heart of the galaxy. We will try to ascertain the truth or falsity of this and numerous other spatial hypotheses."

Despite the additional filter on the pickup telescope itself, the stunning brightness of the surrounding space continued to intensify. Gaseous and radioactive particle matter was so thick here that at times the *Enterprise* seemed to be drifting through a phosphorescent fog, a pale white submersible in a ocean of deep-sea fish. Readings on radiation meters remained within tolerable levels, but an older starship than the *Enterprise* would soon have had her crew fatally burned.

"Heading now zero zero one degrees due east of the galactic plane, Captain," Sulu broke in. "Maintaining indicated observation-recording speed of warp-one."

They were getting very close. A hand touched the button again. He would finish the log entry later.

"Maintain speed, Mr. Sulu. Correct ship to a heading of zero degrees." No other starship captain in history had been able to utter that momentous phrase, and it might be some time before another repeated it.

"The center of the galaxy," he murmured, for the umpteenth time. He looked over to the library computer station, where Spock, like the astronomers, had been working overtime just to record new information.

"I'm not sure what I'll do or how I'll react, if we find there actually is a central something that all matter springs from, like a well. How about you, Spock? Surely you've thought about it."

"From an astrophysical standpoint I find it all quite fascinating, Captain. Personally, I am more intrigued by what

we may encounter there in the nature of subsidiary phenomena. How does gravity react at the center, for example.

"Yet I am afraid we shall be somewhat disappointed and find that the precise center is very much like the area immediately around it, an area such as we are traversing at this very moment," the science officer concluded.

"Galactic center in three minutes, Captain," Sulu reported.

"Thank you, Mr. Sulu. Lieutenant Uhura, sound yellow alert, as planned."

"Aye, sir, yellow alert." Uhura proceeded to make the necessary demands on her instrumentation. The proper alarm signal pealed out.

There was a short wait, then the communications officer looked back at him. "All decks and stations report yellow-alert status effected, Captain."

"Ready for whatever comes, then," Kirk whispered to himself, and added aloud, "I hope."

"What was that, Captain?"

"Nothing, Mr. Spock. Nothing."

At first it seemed as if Spock's dry evaluation was going to turn out to be correct. Nothing unique appeared on the screen; they saw nothing not already previously encountered.

Then it appeared with unexpected suddenness. Somewhere directly ahead was a phenomenon different from anything any of the bridge complement had ever seen.

At first glance it resembled a small nebula trying to turn itself inside out. But it was no normal nebula according to the sensors. The writhing, twisting mass of color was in constant violent motion, spitting out particles and gasses in all directions.

"Mr. Spock," said Kirk quickly, but the science officer was already attending to his recorders.

"Visual contact galactic center, Captain," he reported. "The volume of energy and mass here is overwhelming. Instrumentation can only calibrate a portion of the total flux—their levels don't read any higher."

"All right, Spock, be careful. There's enough energy out there to overload every sensor on the ship." He need not have said it; he was only verbalizing what was obvious to Spock and everyone else.

Kirk stared at the screen, thoroughly mesmerized. There was no form, no pattern, no structure to that violent, churning whirlpool of force.

"Evaluation, Mr. Spock."

"It is indeed the theorized creation point, Captain. Detectors indicate it is putting forth a tremendous amount of particulate matter, from the subatomic levels mostly. There are also new, as yet unidentifiable, structures . . . Also radioactive gasses, free energy. Fortunately we do not have to make interspace calls from here—they would be drowned out a meter from the hull."

"Okay, Spock, we know what's coming out. Is anything going in?" That would be the critical test. Spock's answer would eventually make a number of astronomers happy.

"Very little, if anything, Captain. There are indications that the fabric of space in the immediate vicinity of the creation point is not stable."

"That's hardly surprising," Kirk observed, "in view of the forces at work here."

"Despite the evidence of considerable gravitation potential," Spock continued, as if he were talking about the most common household object, "there is no sign of hydrogen or anything else being drawn into the center from the surrounding space. Altogether an extraordinary phenomenon. I believe we may be looking at the rarest single structure in the known universe: a negative black hole—one that ejects, rather than attracts matter."

Kirk nodded. "That would confirm that all matter in our universe has been drawn from other universes, and that creation is truly infinite, as some theories state."

"Merely because our galaxy draws its substance from the black hole of another universe, Captain, and that our black holes may each well be the galactic center of other star clusters, does not mean that the universe itself is infinite—only somewhat larger than we had suspected."

Kirk wondered at his first officer. Only Spock could concede the possible existence of a billion billion other *universes* and make it come out as an understatement.

He returned his attention to the viewscreen, but it was only a moment before Spock glanced up from his hooded viewer again.

"There is also evidence of other forces at work here, Captain, which are unclassifiable under standard astronomical referents. I would strongly suggest that we—" He stopped.

An automatic stylus was beginning to jiggle up and down on the console to his left. As he watched it, the oscillation increased. Finally it became violent enough to knock the stylus loose from its holder. It rolled off the slanted console onto the deck.

At the same time Spock grabbed at the console edges. The *Enterprise* had begun a rocking motion, sideways, then up and down, then sideways again.

"Easy," said Kirk to everyone in general and no one in particular.

The buffeting grew more violent. "Reverse power, hold this position, then head zero zero one degrees left." They would use this strange new force to help slip around the storm of the center itself. "Deflector screens on full."

"Deflectors up, sir," Sulu informed him, adding, "it's taking considerable power to maintain this heading, sir."

"We'll hold it, Mr. Sulu," said Kirk calmly.

The buffeting didn't vanish entirely, but the increased power being fed to the warp-engines seemed sufficient to reduce it to an occasional sharp tremor. No one was in danger of being thrown from his seat.

The *Enterprise* continued to move around the fiery core.

"Good heavens—look at that!" Sulu exclaimed. Kirk's attention had not varied from the screen, but he understood Sulu's automatic shout. "Just a moment, sir . . . I'll widen the angle." The helmsman worked controls.

Abruptly their field of vision seemed to quadruple, and the phenomenon revealed by their new position became fully visible.

Once again, superlatives were insufficient.

Lines of pure force had grown so strong they had begun to radiate. They stretched from the spastic central core out to the nearest suns in great flaring arcs. Everyone on the bridge, who thought he was past amazement, sat enthralled by the spectacle. The lines glowed and shifted slightly and were to a solar prominence what a spider's web would be to a suspension bridge.

"I wonder," Kirk murmured, "if the surrounding stars hold the creation point steady, via these lines of force, at the center of our galaxy?" Or was the creation point fighting a constant battle, through millions and millions of less detectable lines of force, to hold its myriad suns around it?

"Charting scanners on, Captain," Spock said smoothly. "Commencing official survey central quadrant." Less sophisticated instruments took over now, as formal mapping was begun.

The doors to the bridge elevator slid aside, and McCoy entered, moving quickly.

"Jim, Spock—" Another jolt rocked the bridge. "What in the name of sanity is going . . .?" His voice trailed off. He had just gotten his first glimpse of the mind-boggling panorama spread across the screen.

"What on Earth is that?"

"Nothing we can detect from Earth itself, Bones—or even from nearby. We're here—at the center of the galaxy—and all the theories and guesses and hypotheses about this place appear to have been right . . . with frosting."

They all watched as the *Enterprise* continued to move past the central core.

For the first time, an uncertain tone seemed to be present in Spock's voice. "Captain, we appear to be moving up on a completely new phenomenon."

"Another one?"

Apparently they were not out miracled yet. Something different was indeed showing up on the view-screen.

Kirk saw that some of the feathery lines of iridescent force, instead of leaping out toward nearby stars in smooth arcs, had twisted together. They were curling and writhing violently

about themselves, a concatenation of energy separate from the core being manipulated by a galactic potter's wheel.

The forces created by this secondary center took on a definite shape as they moved closer. Instead of the central chaos, they formed a recognizable, colossal cone. It was visible only when destroyed matter at its edges exploded, or when a force-line flared with a discharge of energy that would dwarf the output of several suns.

Yet sensors revealed that instead of putting out energy-matter like the center point, here it was being drawn inward. But it was most definitely not a black hole, nor a neutron star. It was something as new as the negative black hole of Spock's hypothesis, and something even less recognizable.

A number of stars swirled like dust motes about its rim, spinning crazily. Occasionally one would impinge on the edge of the cone itself. The result was a flare of light—overwhelming if compared to a human-generated explosion, yet far from nova-sized.

Sulu shattered the awed contemplation. "Captain, I'm up to warp-six for flyby on revised course, but that thing seems to be pulling us in. Yet the gravity detectors show no new change in the surrounding field. I don't understand the forces operating here. And it's not a computer malfunction, sir. Our course is definitely being affected."

Even as he spoke, strong vibration rocked the bridge. Yet it was somehow different from before.

"Scanners indicate the energy cone is composed of both matter and energy, like the core itself." Spock said, checking his readouts. "But there appears to be some kind of order at work here, whereas the core point was anarchical in nature.

"There is indeed some powerful attractive force operating within the vortex, but it is, as Mr. Sulu has stated, something other than normal gravity. Something outside our experience, I fear."

"Warp-seven, Captain," the excited Sulu interrupted. "Warp-eight!"

"Take us out of here, Mr. Sulu," Kirk ordered; but the helmsman was already working at his console.

"I've been trying to, sir. We're still being drawn in. Warp-nine . . . warp-ten, sir!"

"Emergency reverse power!"

Back at his post in engineering central, Scott noticed the sudden terrific demands being made on his engines. He held tight to a crossbar to keep from being thrown to the floor by the increasingly wild vibrations and hoped the drive could cope with the forces being pitted against them.

As the *Enterprise* was drawn inexorably nearer the energy vortex, the colors on the viewscreen began to pulse violently, the pastel rainbow giving way to deep golds and reds, all being subsumed into a vital, rippling purple.

Now the ship had been pulled to the very rim of the cosmic cyclone. It hung there a second, then caught and started to spin at tremendous speed around the rim, faster, and faster. On the *Enterprise* the artificial gravity compensators could barely keep up with the steady increase in centrifugal force.

Scott now clung desperately to the crossbar and stared grim-faced at his gauges. Shouts of pain and groans came from various members of his staff who had failed to gain a firm purchase on something immovable.

Somehow, hanging tight with both legs and one arm against the terrific sideways pressure, he managed to pull himself a hand at a time to the nearest wall intercom. From there he tried to raise the bridge.

"Captain . . . Scott here. I don't know how much additional emergency power we can continue to put out before the engines start to break up."

Kirk listened but was helpless to acknowledge. He had been thrown to the floor. Despite the gravity compensators, the whirling was generating G-forces too powerful to be canceled out.

Spock was still seated in his chair at the library station, clinging tightly to the arms. He tried to shift for a still firmer grip. He felt a wrenching pull as the *Enterprise* hit an eddy in the rim of the vortex and was jerked loose. He slid past Kirk and came to a halt up against a console on the opposite side of the bridge.

"Spock . . . you all right?"

His reply ignored Kirk's query. "Captain, there may be only one choice open to us. We must hope this vortex is analogous in its internal structure to Terran/Vulcan counterparts . . . hope that there is a calm in its center where these forces either do not exist or cancel each other out."

"Agreed, Mr. Spock. Well try to make for the eye of the cyclone—if it has one. Mr. Sulu, Mr. Arex . . ."

But neither helmsman was in a position to carry out orders. Sulu was jammed in a tangle of arms and legs against Kirk's command chair, while Arex had skidded all the way back to communications, despite the frantic use of all six arms and legs. He lay pinned against Uhura's feet.

Kirk gritted his teeth and struggled to pull himself toward the deserted navigation console. As he moved, he rose slightly off the deck and was bounced end over end, coming to a stop against the library station.

"Allow me, Captain," said Spock. Now the G-forces seemed to increase, decrease, and change direction capriciously, making it far harder to judge one's movements. Up, down, and sideways changed without warning.

Uhura screamed as she was suddenly thrown and pinned against the ceiling. Much more of this, Kirk reflected, and it wouldn't matter whether the ship broke up or not, because her crew would long since have preceded her.

Somehow Spock managed to inch his way toward the helm. There was a crackling discharge, and the deck lights flashed on and off. More cracklings followed, mixed with the groans of metal alloy strained to its utmost. Kirk revised his estimates of the approaching catastrophe.

The *Enterprise* would disintegrate first after all. They would all experience the unique sensation of floating free in the maelstrom before the surrounding radiation and hard space would reduce them to their component atoms.

Spock reached the helm. Bracing himself firmly with one arm, he used the other to fumble at several controls. The *Enterprise* began to break away from the spinning, violent iridescence and move toward the center of the vortex.

It hung there motionless for several long seconds, warp-engines fighting to drive her outward and back into normal

space. Then the ship began to drift, slowly at first but with steadily increasing speed, down the rapidly narrowing funnel.

But that was all. The vibrating ceased; the smell of overloaded circuits and the sound of tortured metal stopped, and the crushing centrifugal force was instantly wiped out. Once more they had a recognizable up and down, as the ship's artificial gravity computer finally restored some order.

Back in engineering, Scott had to duck as one of his technicians fell slowly past him. Kirk's voice sounded over the intercom.

"Engineering . . . status report." By now Scott was on his feet again—though moving cautiously—and checking readouts. Several of the delicate instruments used to measure gravitation were completely gone, having been maltreated to the point of destruction. They no longer registered anything, since they had been overloaded even beyond emergency shutdown.

Scott whistled silently. Without the powerful gravity compensators, there would be nothing left of the crew of the *Enterprise* now but a multitude of brownish smears against floors, walls, and ceilings.

But the readings on the instruments that had survived intact were encouraging. Scott spoke toward the wide open pickup grid.

"There's some damage, Captain, but I think everything can be repaired." He groaned and reached for his lower back. "Includin' me."

"Okay, Scotty, do your best. We're running down the center of some kind of spiraling energy storm. I don't know how long we've got till we reach bottom, or what will happen when we get there. Be ready. Bridge out."

"Be ready, he says," Scott mumbled, "and for what?" Well, whatever it was, he would do his best to see that the *Enterprise* was ready for it.

"Gabler, Jacobs—there's nothin' wrong with you! Get off your duffs and break out a pair of micro-welders. Some honest work's required of you, for a change!"

On the bridge, everyone was slowly rearranging himself, uncurling from various contorted positions. Fortunately, few of

the sudden changes in gravity had been full-G, and the falls hadn't been as serious as they might have been. Arex gave Uhura, who had probably received the worse banging around, a hand up.

"Would you like to report to Sick Bay, Lieutenant?" asked Kirk worriedly.

"No, I'm all right, Captain," She eased herself slowly back into her seat, wincing. "I don't think the parts of me that hurt would benefit by lying down. They shouldn't impair my efficiency, either—and no remarks, Mr. Spock!"

Spock looked bewildered, and Kirk's smile deepened at his first officer's obvious confusion.

Spock finally decided to ignore what was evidently another touch of inexplicable human humor—preferring that to the thought that Uhura might be more seriously injured than she admitted.

"An incredible experience, Captain."

"Ah, it got to you emotionally, did it, Spock?" pressed McCoy.

"As usual, an incorrect interpretation of a straightforward observation, Doctor. I found it scientifically fascinating, of course."

"I don't suppose you were scared, either?"

"Scared, Doctor? I fail to see why one should be frightened of understandable natural phenomena. I do confess that for several moments, estimates of the forces acting unfavorably on the ship did not induce in me optimism as to our overall chances for survival, however—"

"Oh, never mind, Spock," McCoy turned his attention to Kirk. "At least I had the good sense to be scared, Jim. What now?"

Kirk stared up at the screen, which now showed a seemingly endless series of concentric circles of flaring violet light. The smallest circles tended to be dark to the point of blackness.

"Mr. Sulu?"

"We're moving down the vortex, as assumed, Captain," the helmsman reported, studying his instruments. "And at a speed nothing short of astronomical. The cone itself seemed

nowhere near this long at first examination. Normal space—time laws are badly distorted here. The sensors appear to be functioning properly."

"Any chance of breaking free and making our way back to the rim?" Kirk asked. The helmsman's reply was sobering.

"We've been running at full reverse drive for several minutes, Captain."

"Um." Kirk digested this information quietly. "Stop the drive down to warp-two." There was no point in continuing useless demands on the engines—they might need all the power they could muster, later.

He turned back to McCoy, remembering the doctor's question. "We'll ride it through, Bones. What else can we do?"

"Ride it through to where?"

Spock replied with another of his overwhelming quiet pronouncements. "Perhaps to the center of All Things, Doctor."

McCoy was confused instead of awestruck. "But I thought we'd already passed by the center, Spock?"

"And so we did, Doctor. This vortex was completely unexpected. But to use both our worlds for a crude analogy—there is a fixed north pole on Earth and on Vulcan. Yet this is only a geographic convenience. There is also another 'north pole' that is the real center of natural forces."

"Magnetic north," added Kirk, "and it wanders around from year to year. I see your point, Spock. There may be two centers to the galaxy. A spatial one, from which all else can be measured—and another on which certain different forces converge."

"That is it, Captain," Spock admitted, "and it is that second convergence of forces that we appear to be traveling through to its end."

"Wherever that may be—and it looks like well be there soon." Kirk gestured, and all eyes returned to the main screen.

The violet light seemed to be blending, running together into a smooth maroon pool that glowed like a dim red giant. They struck it seconds later. But the *Enterprise* was moving so supremely fast by then that no matter what the malignant

maroon eye was—red giant or otherwise—they were in and through it before any effect was noted.

A tremendous red flash did erupt around the ship. Crimson sparks and activated particles flew away from her hull, dissolving further into all the primary hues. At Spock's sensor station and the navigation consoles, every instrument went berserk.

There was a long silence.

"My, my," whispered McCoy, his the only voice on the bridge, as he and everyone else sat staring at the screen.

Space as they knew it was . . . gone.

In its place had been substituted the wild nightmare of a color-blind surrealist. Nothing seemed fixed or permanent. What at one moment appeared as the black of normal interstellar space, complete with distant stars, would suddenly fracture like a hemorrhaging amoeba into tiny patches of scattered darkness, still with stars, and turn unexpectedly magenta or maroon or red.

Now and then it appeared as if an ocean of white-hot magma was floating only a few hundred meters beneath the *Enterprise*. A moment later and it formed a glowing roof over their heads, then a wall to either side, continually throwing off bubbling blobs of itself which drifted off in all directions.

As the *Enterprise* moved through it, nonspace slowly started to coalesce, to take on a single form. It gradually became a kind of circular tunnel with unstable sides composed of a fluid yellow substance.

They existed in a yellow, cylindrical universe. As the *Enterprise* continued down the corridor the ship started to slow, its speed dropping from warp-impossible to warp-ten, to one and then sublight speed.

At first the flavescent corridor appeared to be at least a million meters in diameter. Now it had shrunk until the walls seemed ready to touch the hull itself. At the end of the corridor, rotating in its center and blocking further passage, was a spherical object that just might be a world.

"Is that a planet?" exclaimed Sulu, voicing the question in the mind of everyone. It was shockingly, paralyzingly stable-

looking—the first truly stable-looking thing they had seen since entering the vortex.

Stable it might be, but normal it was not. It was striped in red and whites like a candy-cane Jupiter, though it was only slightly larger than Earth-size . . . if the sensors could be believed.

"What is it?" wondered Uhura aloud. "Where are we?"

Spock looked up from the hooded viewer at his station. "I am afraid that our normal navigational references mean very little here, Lieutenant. All readings indicate that we are not in time as we know it. That we are no longer in space as we know it has been self-evident for some time now." He looked at McCoy.

"Doctor, perhaps these readings may mean more to you," McCoy moved over and studied the information in the viewer.

Sulu had pushed away from the navigation console while Arex was idly running the fingers of three hands over various controls. He encountered switches and buttons with random nonchalance. It didn't matter what he hit, nothing produced the slightest reaction.

He looked back at Kirk. "The helm's dead, sir. Some of the instrumentation still registers information, but they don't make any sense. Most of the navigation readouts have simply fallen to zero."

Kirk make a noncommital noise, shifted his attention to communications. "Lieutenant Uhura, try to get a message through to Starfleet. They should at least know of our position here. Maybe someone can be reached at Science Center who has some helpful suggestions."

She worked at her machinery for several minutes, then glanced helplessly back over her shoulder.

"Captain, the subspace radio is dead, too. So are all pickups. I should at least be registering static from any energy flowing around us, but there's nothing, nothing at all."

At that point McCoy happened to notice the chronometer over Spock's station. He checked his own against it, then made a fast check with the still operating library computer.

"Jim, not only is there no time here as we know it, there doesn't seem to be any time. All the ship's chronometers have

stopped. Emergency backup power doesn't seem to make any difference."

"Engineering to bridge."

"Bridge here, Captain speaking." By now Kirk was so numbed that Scott's announcement seemed inevitable instead of frightening.

"There's no reason for it, Captain, no reason at all," complained the stunned, puzzled voice of the chief engineer, "but the antimatter and matter generators are going . . . fading out. Everything seems to be operating perfectly, the engines, converters, everything . . . but they're just fading. We're losing power. Emergency storage cells are dropping rapidly, and I canna tell you why. Everything's coming . . . to a . . . stop." There was a sudden crackling, and they heard Scott's voice again, weaker now as the communicator power evaporated.

". . . a . . . top . . ." There was a final fizzle and the intercom died for good.

As it did, the lights on the bridge went out. As with the intercom, the automatic emergency backups failed to take over.

"It would appear that none of the natural laws of our universe operate here, Captain," Spock observed. For once, even his tone was muted.

"Natural laws," McCoy echoed. "The life-support systems . . . they're probably fading, too. Is everything just going to go . . . out? Hey, I'm floating."

"So am I," came Kirk's voice from somewhere in the darkness nearby.

"And I," reported Sulu. One by one, the rest of them confirmed the loss of gravity.

Without light and gravity the universe lost all sense. There was no true direction, no sense of up or down—or of right and wrong. Kirk found himself curling into a fetal position as his mind tried vainly to cope with the absence of reality.

No! He forced himself to stick out his arms and legs. He would die in the shape of a man.

McCoy coughed, found himself propelled by the slight action. Eventually he bumped into something hard—whether

floor or ceiling he could not tell. Then he noticed something else.

"Jim . . . air's getting bad . . . needs circulation . . . cleaning."

Kirk tried to orient himself in the darkness as he spoke. It was hopeless. He could only pray that the open intercom would pick up his voice.

"Engineering!" he shouted, "we're getting stale air, Go to battery power on all circulation instrumentation. Primary alert, Scotty!"

Silence and soft darkness.

"Mr. Sulu."

"Here, Captain," came a reluctant, weak reply. The helmsman coughed slightly from somewhere nearby.

"Mr. Sulu," Kirk said slowly and distinctly, "there is an emergency. Go to battery power."

"I can't, Captain. I don't know where the console is."

"I am still holding my seat, Captain." Arex's voice! But Kirk's last hopes disappeared with the navigator's reply. "When the lights went I tried switching to reserves. There isn't any battery power on the bridge, either. Either they've been drained or they simply don't operate in this space-time continuum. I'm sure I tried the proper controls. Everything's gone dead." He coughed, and his voice faded to a thin wheeze.

". . . dead . . ."

"Arex?" Kirk inhaled and found himself choking. His hand went to his throat. Air . . . he was drowning, smothering, and the darkness was a blanket over him.

He heard a faint voice . . . McCoy. "Jim . . . Jim . . . we've got to do something . . . we've . . ." Then it, too, faded and was gone.

Gasping, Kirk tried to reach out to him, flailing in the emptiness, struggling to touch another human being a last time. He felt something, turned, straining. Another hand touched his and gripped tight.

"Captain?" Kirk couldn't see the figure next to him . . . yet in his mind he did.

"Good-bye, Mr. Spock."
"Good-bye, Captain . . ."

II

Peace.

Night.

Blindness . . . Kirk found himself blinded, dazzled, stunned by the unexpected flare that lit the bridge in scintillating geometric patterns. It fluoresced in the unnatural brilliance. The strange designs pulsed for a few seconds longer, then disappeared.

Kirk felt his vision returning as his outraged retinas began to cope with the new illumination. An artificial gravity seemed to be coming back on. A moment later he was back on the floor, right side up, and sitting next to the command chair.

There were moans and coughs from all around, but they had air again, though it was weak like the new gravity. And as he looked around he saw that the bridge complement was back to normal.

Almost to normal. There was one exception.

A new man.

No, not a man . . . an alien! Manlike, but still alien. Kirk stared at him in disbelief, and the wonder stemmed not from its alienness, but its familiarity.

Was it possible that this was all illusion? That before dying a man underwent a period of mirage-ridden temporary insanity?

The creature standing before him was half-goat, half-man. No bigger than Kirk or Spock. he was complete down to goat's horns, cloven hooves, and short, flicking tail—the compendium of all the goat-gods of the old terran myths. Wide-shouldered and smoothly muscular, he wore a short beard and nothing else, save the thick fleece that covered him from waist to toe.

In human terms the goat-man appeared to be about fifty years old. That probably meant nothing, of course. But exactly how far off in his age-estimate Kirk actually was, he would not have believed.

The apparition was surveying them all with a mild, slightly bemused grin. All his movements hinted at constant delight and endless energy. And there was a strange, dancing glint in his eyes.

"Ah, humans!" came an earthquake voice that thundered around the bridge. "Lovely, primitive humans. Can't you do anything right?"

Kirk was aware the goat-man was looking down at him. He started to try and stand, but the effort was too much in the still tenuous atmosphere. "Please . . ." The deck felt like a coffin-bottom. "We need better air than this, and normal gravity . . ." His plea trailed off in a racking cough.

"Of course, of course. I was so pleased to see you—thoughtless of me. A moment."

He raised both hands over his head and brought them together with a deafening slap. Lightning flashed between his palms and formed a crackling, floating ball in the air nearby, pulsing with internal energies.

Stroking his beard with one hand, the goat-man studied the ball-lightning as it formed a complex diagram of pure energy. Then he nodded approvingly. Jabbing a finger into its center, he stirred the energy like paste. At the same time, the thundering voice sounded a single word.

"RADAMANTHUS!"

The energy diagram shattered, the flaring shards swirling around the tip of his moving finger. They collapsed to a pinpoint and vanished. A rising hum was interspersed with a series of loud clicks—something Kirk had heard few times before. Dead bridge relays snapping over as they were reactivated! The lights suddenly returned to normal, as did the gravity. And there was a sweetness in the air Kirk never thought to smell again.

Spock looked over to the library station. Computer lights once again flashed in ready patterns, indicating operational status. Arex stared in wonder at the navigation console. The instrumentation was registering again . . . though as yet their readings were still incomprehensible. No doubt they meant *something*, but Arex had no reference tables for this . . . place.

Even the viewscreen shone with its accustomed brilliance, once more displaying a panorama of the red-and-white world suspended below them.

Spock climbed to his feet. He took a deep, experimental breath, showing every sign of expecting his body to fly apart with the force of the inhalation.

When nothing so cataclysmic happened, he tried another, and another, then nodded in satisfaction. He was operational again, too.

Kirk also smiled in relief when, on climbing to his feet, he also found he was in good repair. Nothing seemed to be broken. And how marvelous it was just to be able to breathe. He walked to the command chair, resumed his seat.

McCoy, however, chose to remain seated on the deck. He was not going anywhere for several minutes.

Evidently quite pleased with himself, the goat-man remained standing in the middle of this renewed activity. Smiling, he began to walk around the bridge, staring curiously at this or that instrument, occasionally nodding sagely to himself or letting out a chuckle of amusement.

Eventually he stopped and turned to look back at Kirk, hands on hips.

"Everything is working again, my friends?"

"It is," admitted a confused Spock, after a rapid check of his readouts, "but it should not be. It cannot be. It is not . . . logical."

Olympian laughter rolled and boomed around the bridge as the goat-man threw back his head and roared.

"You are amused?" Spock inquired politely.

"Logical!" The goat-man grinned at him. "To whose logic do you refer, my elfin friend?"

"Look around you, Spock," advised McCoy, still sitting on the deck and enjoying life again. "Everything is working, including you and me." He made pacifying gestures with his hands at the first officer. "Let's not try to argue this gentleman out of his miracles, hmmm? It may be illogical for us to be alive now, but I'm willing to concede the situation."

"Be happy, Mr. Spock," the goat-man suggested. He ignored the first officer's continued bewilderment and spread his arms

in a gesture of warm welcome. He was embracing all of them—spiritually, at least.

And he seemed at least as pleased by their good health and presence as they were by his.

"Welcome, welcome. I knew eventually humans would come searching for me—you always do. We meet again. A toast!" He reached into nearby air, and a huge tankard suddenly appeared in his hand.

Smaller versions popped into being in the hands of everyone else. The goat-man gestured to them all with his, proceeded to drain it with undisguised gusto.

Sulu took a hesitant sip from his own. His eyes lit up. He commenced to drink deeply from it. His example was quickly imitated by his shipmates.

The now-empty tankard vanishing conveniently from his hand, the goat-man moved over and helped McCoy gently to his feet. McCoy had an opportunity to study the alien at close range. By the time he stood upright again, he was satisfied that their visitor wore no clever costume. He was real, from the tip of his horns to the cleft in his hooves.

Those hooves clacked sharply on the deck as the goat-man stepped back. Now he put an arm around Spock, brought him over to McCoy and embraced both of them like long-lost brothers.

"I don't want to be impolite," Kirk began, "especially after what you've done for us . . . but who are you?"

"Who am I? Oh, you want a name! Call me Baal." He paused thoughtfully. "Or Lucien. Yes, Lucien. But above all, call me friend." One finger fluttered skyward as he declaimed, "Never could I abandon those who have come so far to frolic with me . . . for such purpose you must have been sent."

He surveyed the bridge again, speaking before Kirk could tell him that their motive for being here was somewhat different and not exactly voluntary.

"But not here, no, no. This is not a proper place. Let us leave this vessel and repair to where more daring delights lie." His hands moved over his head, a complicated swirling movement that left behind a trial of fading amber light, like moving lights in a time-lapse picture.

There was an explosion of dull red light, and then the swirling trails had vanished.

So had Kirk, Spock, Dr. McCoy—and the creature that called itself Lucien.

Sulu stared at the blank places on the bridge. He walked to the spot where the ship's doctor had stood seconds before, moved his hands through the air over the place like a blind man searching for unknown things.

Uhura watched him, her face showing fear and bewilderment, while Arex sat motionless by the operative but still useless navigation console.

In a sense, they were still drifting in darkness . . .

Only a last word or two lingered in Sulu's mind, the last thing the goat-man had said before disappearing. Or were they words—or only meaningless nonsense syllables of an alien argot which his brain automatically arranged into human-sounding groups?

"Megas-tu . . ." the goat-man had said.

Kirk felt himself floating, floating. A globe turned slowly, patiently beneath him, came nearer. He saw that its red-and-white candy stripes were vast cloud formations. They were in constant motion crashing and rolling against one another, sometimes blending into various shades of pink, sometimes forming sharp lines between. Red battled white here as the sea battled the land on more familiar worlds.

They drifted further, closer—for he could see other shapes floating with him—and suddenly were within the banded atmosphere. The crimson and cream bands kept their color as he descended, and for the first time he saw what caused the redness. Miles-high storms of brilliant red dust and sand colored the clouds.

Then the surface became visible, an unstable, swirling chaos of constantly changing shape and form. Only occasional isolated hints of something solid beneath him indicated that this planet possessed a real surface. Even so, he felt there was nothing to prevent them from drifting right through that flowing "ground" until they came out the other side of the world.

As soon as he thought he had finally fixed a stable point on the surface, it would break apart and dissolve into nothingness, or explode in a pinwheel of color.

Nothing was finite here; nothing was constant; nothing was real. Even the air had color, the wind producing harsh cries and strange slithering sounds as of creatures and cloth brushing against one another.

The soul-filled breeze blew red-and-white particles into miniature dust-storms that twisted and writhed into insane alien shapes.

In the midst of this anarchy, four people appeared.

Kirk was one of them, Spock and McCoy two others, Lucien the fourth. The three officers immediately covered their eyes. Until they had actually touched down the three officers had seemed to be at once a part of and apart from the elements. Now the wind had a chillness to it, and the flying sand abraded unprotected flesh.

They shielded their faces as best they could and tried to see around them. There was no discernable horizon. Lucien stood nearby, impassive, waiting, watching.

"Spock, Bones—you all right?" Kirk managed to shout. The sound of his own voice in this place was reassuring.

"Nothing more serious than a faceful of sand, Jim," McCoy responded. "But I wish I had a medical tricorder, just to check in case we—" He broke off. Kirk turned, saw through separated fingers that the doctor was staring at him. That wasn't surprising; he found himself staring in fascination back at McCoy.

"Jim, look at yourself!"

Kirk felt no change—and yet there was something. He looked at himself, as instructed, and saw fingers parting from hands, hands from wrists, wrists from arms, and arms from shoulders. All of his limbs were drifting away from the central torso, drifting away and changing shape. He saw his trunk splitting up into neat, irregular blobs, still fully clothed. There was no pain, merely the quiet astonishing sight of bits of himself coming apart, like a jigsaw puzzle in water.

The same thing was happening to Spock and McCoy. Their bodies were coming apart in toy-like bits and pieces, floating

away from one another, sections of loose Spock mixing with fragments of McCoy.

Little bits of the *Enterprise*'s first officer tumbled lazily past Kirk. The painless amputations were changing themselves, now stretching out like rubber, now growing thick and fat, as they wobbled along.

Spock stared in fascination as his left arm elongated and turned into a flowing rivulet of colored sand.

"Lucien, do something!" Kirk yelled.

"But why, Captain?" The goat-man shook his head pityingly, suddenly remembering. "Oh, very well. I'd forgotten how much bodily integrity means to you poor humans." Kirk noticed that the goat-man had also come apart, though it didn't appear to bother him.

A swirling cloud of dust formed one of Lucien's hands, fully equipped with a proper complement of fingers. It moved, and something like a neon pentagram appeared in the air, floating, glowing radiantly. There was a flash of brilliant crimson again —Lucien seemed fond of red, or perhaps that was simply the common color of manipulated energy here—from each point of the five-cornered shape. It was repeated once, twice, and twice again.

Five drifting globes of flame touched the free particles, squeezing them together, reshaping and rejoining the mixed forms and making them whole again.

Kirk saw his arms, legs, lower torso reform, move, and join together again neatly and painlessly. Abruptly, the drifting flame winked out. The pentagram itself followed shortly, vanishing into the all-consuming wind.

Kirk reached down and cautiously felt himself. He pulled experimentally at his right wrist with his left—not altogether sure how he would react if the hand came off. Around him, the rest of the impossible world still remained shapeless, all rolling mists and roarings and whines arising out of nothingness.

Lucien sighed. Probably in deference to his guests, he had reformed his own corpus. "This isn't easy, you know, holding us all together like this. It's not even natural."

"If you know as much about us as you claim to," said a much relieved McCoy, "you'll know that being in one piece is very natural where we come from."

"Really, Doctor?" Spock commented. "Personally, I find all this quite absorbing."

"Yes, but that's probably because you're not natural to begin with, Spock."

Suddenly, a pair of long green tentacles, like the arms of an octopus, appeared out of the coiling mists and brushed against the face of a startled Kirk. Instinctively, he jerked away, and they vanished.

"Look, Lucien," he began, as much to take his mind off the disturbing apparition as to obtain information, "or whatever you want to call yourself—I want to know why you brought us here." Even as he said the words he was fully aware that if the goat-man chose to ignore the question they could do nothing to compel him to answer.

It made no difference whether he was inclined to or not. Before their savior/captor could reply, a tremendous roaring sprang up like the wildest of hurricanes. A frenzied wind whipped up around them. It lifted Kirk and dashed him to the ground, which conveniently became soft sand beneath him just in time to cushion the impact

Lucien frowned and made another of his cryptic gestures. Red and rose energy flashed from his fingertips. The hurricane wind died as abruptly as it had arisen. Lucien finished his complicated hand-weaving in the air.

Even as they watched, the landscape shimmered, altered, and began to take on form and substance. Then they were standing on a grassy knoll, complete with weeds, trees, and a running stream. The knoll was cloaked in heather and milkweed. Kirk became aware of a new figure standing next to him. He looked down.

A small goat-boy stared back at him. A dancing miniature whirlwind spun in his open palm—the hurricane which had just thrown Kirk so callously around. The toy tornado slowed, slowed, and became a child's top. It stopped and fell over in the boy's hand.

Lucien bestowed a mildly disapproving smile on the youngster. "Kids will play." The boy grinned back, clutched tightly at his top, and hurried off to the top of the knoll.

Kirk picked himself up off the grass, pulling up a small tuft of it as he rose, and examined the newly materialized growth. It looked and smelled like good old earth-type field clover. But he wouldn't have batted an eye if it had suddenly turned into a twelve-legged Denebian spider.

Lucien was still busy. He dropped his hands to his sides and brought them up slowly, trembling, toward the sky. The forest rose close around them in rhythm with his rising hands, everything from bushes and seedlings to mature trees.

There was a gap in the woods, and Lucien gestured toward it, pointing to a vast structure that one moment was kilometers away, the next, close enough to reach out and touch.

"Is this better, my friends? You must remember it has been a long, long time since I've associated with anything human. I hope memory serves well enough. I have tried to translate my world into symbols your minds can comprehend. I could have altered your minds to perceive mine, instead, but I seem to recall that you frown on such things."

No one claimed otherwise.

By then they were all gazing toward the gap in the trees, toward the now-near, now-distant city.

It was a fairyland of crystal and ceramic mosaic, of glass and free-sculpted metals—a fairyland into which the forest, by all laws of perspective, should have extended, yet did not.

On open streets, men and women and children walked through neatly paved ways, each person differently dressed, all elaborately caped and gowned.

"Welcome, my friends, to Megas-tu," Lucien declaimed happily. "Welcome to you, and you, and you." He said it proudly, like an old man showing off his favorite grandson.

Kirk turned from the incredible metropolis back to the goat-man. "And what is Megas-tu? I would have said a world, but I've seen too much in the past few hours, or weeks, or whatever the time-referent is here, to accept anything merely on what I see."

"It is merely that, Captain James Kirk. A world. A world that operates on rules different from those of your universe." He snapped the fingers of one hand, and they found themselves seated on the grass in front of a flowing brook.

Brocaded cloths were spread all around. Quantities of sweet-smelling food and drink showed from under the lids of bulging wicker baskets. It was all very beautiful and nice and horrifying.

Lucien noticed the ambivalent expressions of his guests, looked thoughtful. "Let me see . . . it takes a moment for me to remember some of your terms, you know. What is the word?" He paused a moment, then brightened.

"Ah yes, magic. Our universe operates according to the precepts of what you superstitiously call magic. Our laws are not unrealistic—merely different." He plucked an apple from empty air, took a bite out of it, and caught another. He tossed it to McCoy.

The doctor caught it automatically. "I know this is just a figment of my imagination, but—" He took a sample nibble, smiled in approval.

"It is, as you see, quite real, Dr. McCoy," Lucien continued. "Everything here is real, if you only try to see. For example . . ." He seemed to search the deserted knoll for a moment, then gestured.

An intricately decorated tent decorated with cabalistic symbols appeared on the grass a short distance away. An attractive girl, as delicate as Chinese porcelain, moved to enter the tent. She paused at the entrance, which was opened by an old, wrinkled woman.

They were still too far away for the watchers from the *Enterprise* to overhear their conversation, but some kind of business transaction seemed to be taking place. After a few minutes of this, the old woman nodded and disappeared inside. She came out shortly thereafter holding a small stoppered bottle.

Lucien spoke while the two women—if such they really were—resumed their conversation. "Beautiful, isn't she? But all our women are as young and appealing as they want to be. When anyone can be as lovely as her aesthetics demand, character soon takes over from vanity. Hence the potion-seller

prefers a more traditional configuration. It makes for better business.

"To insure the man of her dreams, the young one seeks a slight edge."

"Not a love potion?" said the skeptical Kirk. "There's nothing magical about that. It's just a question of chemistry."

Lucien gave him an odd look. "You must have made some progress in certain areas since I last visited your people, Captain." He gestured, and the tent scene vanished.

Another exchange was taking place off to their right, now, on what should have been the empty top of the knoll. Two human shapes were conversing there. One was a tall, thin gentleman clad in flowing robes and a conical hat inscribed with mystic devices. He stood stroking his long white beard, deep in discussion with a manlike creature that sported a pair of wings and a traditionally gargoylish face.

After some minutes of this, the tall man in the robes turned and gestured with his hands. There was a by-now familiar crackling in the air, and sparks of loose energy grew from nothingness. They lengthened, joined together, forming beams and walls and ceilings.

The clashing colors coalesced into four solid uprights. Gesturing and prancing all the while, the oldster danced around them, solidifying the small building. It rose lithe, delicate, with high ornamental spires and turrets and smooth polished domes.

Eventually the robed dancer came to a halt. Hands on hips, he studied the finished project, then nodded in satisfaction at his completed handiwork. A last gesture, and a sign appeared over the entrance to the compact castle, the inscription in an unknown calligraphy.

"Do you need a home?" asked Lucien. "A stable, a town? Stop in and visit your friendly sorcerer-contractor. Let him do the hard work."

"Sorcerer," Spock muttered. "Of course. Federation scientists were more correct than they suspected. In order to function, any supranormal spatial phenomenon must extend through known space and time to another dimensional plane.

"The interaction of interdimensional forces supplies the energy to produce new galactic matter. It explains not only our expanding universe, but also why the physical laws here differ so completely from our own."

"I'm not sure I follow all that, Spock, but are you saying you believe in magic?"

Spock looked back at him unwaveringly. "I believe in what is logical and what follows from observable facts, Doctor. The basic laws here appear to be what we sometimes call 'magic.' The *Enterprise* does not operate according to these principles, therefore it ceased to function. And so, almost, did we."

"So you used magic," guessed Kirk, turning to face Lucien, "to get our ship working again."

"It was the natural thing to do, Captain. You could have done it yourself, with a little instruction. But then, few of you humans ever bothered to become proficient at magic." He frowned slightly. "Those among you who did were not looked upon with favor. Some of you even managed to reach all the way through to Megas-tu through small interdimensional vortices."

"All the way from Earth to here?" exclaimed a cynical McCoy. "Impossible."

"Distances in our universe do not operate according to your laws, either, Doctor," Lucien told him. "By our methods of reckoning, certain parts of Earth are right next door."

"Lucien," interrupted Kirk, suddenly serious, "you persist in calling us friends, implying that you know us. Even more, that we should know you. But how?"

"Ah, Captain, Captain!" The goat-man leaned back on the grass and rested his head in his hands, staring at the blue sky. "To feign such ignorance with me. Still, it way always one of my problems." He stopped, and Kirk got the impression he had somehow hurt the goat-man's feelings.

Lucien crawled forward then and swept his hand through the clear surface of the brook. His fingers broke the water once and withdrew.

"Listen, look, I'll try to explain further."

The ripples stilled. Colors began to appear, staining the clearness. Shapes started to form, and soon it was like looking

into a viewscreen. Gone completely was the sandy bottom of the stream. In its place they saw a broad panorama of men and women—Megans—exotic and familiar, chiseled handsome and intentionally plain, all sitting lost in contemplation amid the howling chaos that was the real surface of Megas-tu.

"This may seem to you humans to be a world of insanity and instability," declared Lucien. "But it has the quality of change we all demand. My people are calm and contented, each one existing in the world of his or her imagination."

The image in the screen blurred, changed, and Kirk and his companions had again a view of the Megan universe as they first encountered it, a riot of blending colors and splinters of stellar shape.

"There are no rivals in our little universe at all, Captain Kirk. No other life-forms save ourselves." The picture jumped again, and they were back on Megas-tu. As they watched, the people in the stream-picture stood together, and some of them began to rise upward, free of the planet.

"Millennia ago," Lucien continued, "in our search for companionship, we Megans passed through the various gates between dimensions, including the great vortex you entered by.

"Eventually, on one such expedition, we discovered," and the scene shifted again as if anticipating his words, "your world—Earth." They now saw a view of the blue-white globe of Terra, seen from space. Kirk felt an unexpected quickening. He had been away from home for too long.

"Wherever we went we became friends and advisors to mankind. To help your ancestors out of their misery and ignorance we drew as best we could on the power left behind in our own universe, bringing it in through tiny gates." Hands stirred the water again, and ripples blotted out the blue-white ball.

When the stream had stilled once more, Kirk saw only the sandy bottom and a couple of dreamlike shadows cast by small fish.

Lucien sat back and shook the droplets from his hand. "Eventually we were forced to leave," he concluded. "It was a group decision. For myself, I wanted to stay. Ah, how I

fought, how I argued! You see, I was the generalist, the apologist among specialists.

"The troublemaker, the others said. But I'd grown to love Earth and its unpredictable, funny people." He saw visions of the past. "Those were the days . . . you crazy, irrational humans." He looked over at them.

"But now you have come back to me. It is so good to see you again." He leaped to his feet, a gesture of pure joy, and sprang into a hectic, prancing dance, to the accompaniment of a cheerful piping that seemed to come from all around them.

The music was infectious, and Kirk found himself smiling as he spoke. "If you Megans enjoyed Earth so much, why did you leave it? I don't understand . . ."

"Captain, good Captain, always so curious, always there must be a reason," the dancing Lucien laughed. "Another reason why I liked you humans so much. The vortex knows you have many special qualities—and special faults."

He took a giant leap and whirled in the air, performing an outrageous multiple pirouette that carried him to the tops of the highest trees . . . where he froze motionless. There was a new note in his voice when he spoke, a hint of concern, of worry, that was alien to the Lucien they had started to know.

"No." The piping melody faded into silence, and he was down at their side again in a second. His boyish pleasure had turned desperately serious.

"You must go."

"What is it?" asked a nervous McCoy. "What's wrong?"

"I cannot tell you just now. But you must return to your vessel immediately. And quiet, be quiet about it. You must not give your presence away."

Kirk tried for elaboration, but Lucien was already gesturing again. A rainbow haze blurred Kirk's vision, and he felt himself rising, rising and dissolving . . .

Scott, Sulu and Uhura were clustered anxiously on the bridge, all crowded around the main navigation console where Arex was struggling to make some sense out of the computer

readouts. Their study was shattered by a sudden crackling behind them, and they turned quickly.

Pulsing with vast power held carefully in check, a red-and-white cloud appeared in the center of the bridge. It broke into three smaller clouds, which gradually contracted into the shapes of Kirk, McCoy, and Spock.

Everyone on the bridge rushed forward to the returned officers, all trying to speak at once.

"Captain Kirk . . . what happened? . . . where were you all? . . . given you up, Mr. Spock . . ."

"One at a time, one at a time," Kirk admonished them, making calming motions. "We're . . . we're all right." He took a deep breath, looked around him.

They were back on the *Enterprise*, and it had never looked quite so good. After the mad maelstrom below, the clean lines of the bridge were reassuring—even if they held their shape only through Lucien's will. And it was good to be back among *real* people again. Though the look in Uhura's eyes . . .

"Status report, first."

"Everything okay, it seems, Captain. All systems except the warp-engines are workin' perfectly, and I can have them operatin' in two or three hours. But you . . ."

"The only thing that's wrong with me, Mr. Scott, is that I'm still badly confused by a number of things."

"You've got plenty of company, Jim," McCoy noted. "What did Lucien mean, we're not to 'give ourselves away'? Give ourselves away to whom? Couldn't anyone else on Megas-tu detect us up here? I would think we kind of stand out."

"They'd need mighty powerful scanners to find us now," said Scott, who was ignorant of the realities of Megas. "See that?" He indicated the main viewscreen.

A thick layer of dense, particle-laden material now lay like luminescent gray smoke between the *Enterprise* and the surface, blotting out the red-and-white clouds below them.

"It's somethin' like a big dust cloud, Captain," said Scott, "and yet it's different. Been between us and the surface ever since you disappeared. Communicator and scanner beams wouldn't penetrate . . . we tried." Kirk swiveled to face the library station.

"If it was Lucien who put it there, Captain," Spock mused, "the question then becomes . . . why is he hiding us? What danger are we in from something on his world?" Kirk nodded, turned back to his chief engineer.

"Weapon's status, Mr. Scott? It seems we may have to be ready to defend ourselves."

"Then it'll have to be with fast talk, Captain. Our phaser banks and defensive screens require at least a partial powering-up of the warp-drive engines. Give me a few hours and I might be able to say different."

"Do the best you can, Scotty." Kirk's voice dropped to a murmur. "We can't defend ourselves and we can't run away. And we don't even know what it is we might have to fight. So," and he clapped both hands firmly to the arms of the command chair, "we wait."

"And do what?" wondered McCoy aloud. "Lucien may not show up again for three hundred years, our time. By then, I might be an old man."

"I have an interesting idea," proposed a calm voice. They all turned their attention to Spock. "Captain, I think it would be best to first try this in private. If you will accompany me to my quarters? And Dr. McCoy as well?"

"What have you got in mind, Spock?"

"Something in the nature of an experiment, Captain. It may prove quite interesting. And if we are fortunate, practical as well."

The door slid quietly aside as the three officers entered Spock's spacious room. Kirk and McCoy watched as Spock moved to his desk and fished out a thick, white marking stylus. He waved them to one side.

"A little room, please, gentlemen." They stepped back and stood against the far wall.

While they watched with growing curiosity, Spock proceeded to sketch a rough pentagram on the smooth floor, erasing one arm and redrawing it when it seemed too much longer than the others. Kirk and McCoy recognized the pentagram shape, something that made no sense in connection with Spock. The latter clarified his actions as soon as the diagram was finished.

"Not being a logical corollary of physics, magic was never subjected to quite the serious study on Vulcan as it received on Earth. No doubt the actions of visiting Megans lent it somewhat more credibility on your world. Some of your more credulous philosophers—or more perceptive—went as far as to attempt to codify the most formal principles of the so-called 'dark arts.' In the course of my readings on Earth I had occasion to encounter much information of this sort." He got to his feet, gazed thoughtfully down at the pentagram.

"I believe this is one of the most important and basic mystical symbols described by the terran 'magicians.' I observed Lucien utilizing the same device earlier." Kirk began to see where Spock was heading.

"Lucien did say something to the effect that we could master the same techniques," Kirk pondered. "Spock, you're saying that as long as we're in this universe, we can 'work' magic, too?"

"One must always be prepared to employ the resources at hand, Captain." He hesitated. "Although I must confess it requires considerable effort for me to readjust my thinking along such lines." He walked into the center of the pentagram.

"Watch there, now." He pointed toward his desk. An elaborate three-dimensional maze laden with double-toned crystal pieces sat on one end.

"I will attempt to move one of the Vulcan chess pieces using only magic—magic in our universe, but what should merely be the proper utilization of a local scientific principle."

"But how can you, Spock?" McCoy objected. "I mean, you don't know the words, or the proper gestures, or—"

"It should be the mental state that counts, Doctor. And I have the terran magical principles to use for a base." He gestured for quiet, assumed a stance of deep concentration.

Stretching out his arms toward the table, he began to speak. "May the energy of this universe be the power in me." Kirk and McCoy stared expectantly, hopefully, at the chess set. There was no hint of movement.

"Forget it, Spock," advised McCoy after several minutes of intense concentration on the first officer's part had proven

ineffectual. "It won't work."

Spock lowered his arms slightly and opened his eyes. "It *has* to work, Doctor. It is logical it should work—here." He closed his eyes halfway and tried again.

"I draw on your energy . . . I know I can. I *believe* I can. For every action, yea, let there be an equal and opposite reaction."

There was a sudden crackling in the air. McCoy jumped halfway out of his regulation boots. Yellow and black fire flashed around Spock's body. A thin sliver of energy leaped from one of his hands to the table.

It touched a Vulcan rook, enveloped it in yellow flame, and moved it three spaces forward. Kirk smiled.

"Well now. Let me try that, Spock." Spock obligingly stepped out of the pentagram and let Kirk take his place.

He raised his arms hesitantly toward the table, looked over at his first officer for reassurance. "This feels ridiculous, Mr. Spock."

"The important thing is to relax and concentrate, Captain. I think the physical gesture is purely supplementary . . . a psychological crutch. Merely a way of helping the mind focus thought. Like talking out loud."

"Now really, Jim," began McCoy. "You can't expect to fully duplicate . . ."

McCoy was cut off by the rumble of a small thunderclap echoing through the room. But the doctor was right. Kirk could not duplicate Spock's results . . . exactly.

The colors that flashed around him were not yellow and black, but blue and green, sea-color fire. One fringe of it nudged a bishop two spaces, then lifted and dropped it down a level.

"Good move, Captain," commented Spock idly. Kirk dropped his arms and stared at the chessboard, still not quite able to believe he had done it.

Sudden enthusiasm replaced McCoy's skepticism. "Wait a minute now—it's my turn."

"Only two at a time can play the game, Doctor. I believe we can find other, more interesting uses, for this extraordinary ability. With a little practice, it should be possible to control

the local energy flow without the use of clumsy inscribed symbols such as this pentagram."

The demonstration that Kirk, Spock, and McCoy gave on the bridge caused the expected sensation, but the surprise and shock soon gave way to delight as Sulu, Uhura, and the others discovered they too could manipulate the Megan magic.

Not having a chess set handy, they followed Spock's suggestion and practiced with the bridge instrumentation. Kirk discovered that he was able to activate or deactivate the main viewscreen with a simple gesture. But he could not work the magnification controls. Apparently the more delicate the instrument, the finer one's grasp of the energies involved had to be.

"Hey, where's Scotty?" asked McCoy suddenly, looking around the bridge.

"I think he headed up to the recreation room on B-deck," Sulu replied absently. He was making elaborate twisting movements, but so far had achieved nothing more than a floating cloud of writhing energy a meter in front of his hands.

"Now what do you think he'd want in there, do you suppose?" wondered Kirk.

Scott surveyed the recreation room to make certain it was empty. Then he moved to the unit games dispenser and requested a normal tennis ball. But he didn't go through the door leading to the indoor court.

Instead, he made a number of swinging, swerving gestures with both hands. Energy appeared out of air and formed a glowing nimbus around the ball. It was abruptly sucked up by the spheroid, acting as a vacuum. The ball quivered as Scott concentrated on it, then dropped to the floor, bounced once and ricocheted off the far wall.

Beautifully executed—except Scott had overlooked one small factor. The ball was moving at about a hundred kilometers an hour, and showed no sign of slowing down.

It struck the roof and rocketed toward Scott. Showing some impressive speed of his own, the chief engineer dove under a nearby game table. The ball contacted the floor near his left foot, shot across the room, hit the far wall, bounced back up

to the ceiling, the floor again, across the room—and it appeared to be picking *up* speed.

Seconds later it whizzed past his head, and Scott hurriedly covered his face with his hands. Crouched in that awkward position he wiggled his fingers desperately. It had not the slightest effect on the ball, which continued to whizz around the room like a runaway warp-engine. It was now moving so fast Scott could see it only as a weak blur.

Scottish magic can be very strong.

Back up on the bridge, Sulu had assumed a look of grim determination. He made a last, twisting thrust at the drifting ball of energy he had conjured up. Abruptly it darkened, coalesced, and formed into the most beautiful girl in this or any other universe.

He had been expecting it all along—the helmsman was a positive thinker. He moved forward, arms extended to embrace her . . . but when his lips touched, the image dissolved.

"I've heard of devastating kissers," said the watching McCoy, "but don't you think that's overdoing it a little, Sulu?"

"Very funny, Doctor," Sulu moved his hands again, slowly constructing another human shape out of colored fire.

The officers of the *Enterprise* continued to practice their new-found talents. Eventually Kirk found that he could make the viewscreen do just about anything it could do in normal space-time, only here he did not have to touch a single control.

On B-deck, the whining ball finally came to a sudden halt. Scott looked out warily from under the table. First the covering and finally the interior material had disintegrated—shredded by sheer speed. But not before the ball had managed to put some respectable dents in the metal walls.

Eyeing the now defunct remnants of the ball with respect, he moved back to the games producer . . . and ordered a set of checkers. This time he would practice with something a little less lethal.

Sulu was sweating with effort and had managed to generate another girl. He leaned toward her again. This time his curious audience included several other members of the

bridge complement, who had left off their own practicing to watch him.

"Good luck," Uhura volunteered.

Sulu kissed the apparition . . . and the girl's arms went around him as she kissed back. His eyes bugged in surprise. That he hadn't expected. But he recovered quickly, returned the kiss with fervor—too much fervor. The energy-waif burst into little match-flares and was gone.

Sulu was prepared to try yet a third time, but a red-and-white cloud suddenly filled the center of the bridge. It faded, and once more Lucien stood among them. But this time he was not grinning or dancing. In fact, he looked agitated and upset.

"What are you doing?" He gazed around in anxious confusion. Kirk looked back at him.

"Learning to protect ourselves, Lucien."

"Protect yourselves? Is that all human beings ever think about—fighting? I'll take care of you. That's what friends are for." He started pacing back and forth.

"I don't know . . . I just don't know. All this mental energy you've been using. Your peculiar patterns . . . it can be traced, you know. You might be found."

A voice thunderous enough to dwarf Lucien's suddenly filled the bridge, accompanied by the whistling, howling, spine-twisting moans of the real, uncontrolled Megas-tu.

"HAVE BEEN FOUND!" it rumbled.

Lucien halted in mid-step. Kirk was startled to see something very like fear appear in the face of the up to now omnipotent goat-man. For the first time it occurred to Kirk that Lucien might not have exceptional powers among his own kind.

He didn't care to think what sort of being might.

But it seemed they were about to find out.

A new cloud of colors began to form on the bridge. There was more of the fiery black this time—yellow, white, electric blues and orange, swirling and reforming and curling; all the slithery nightmare shapes of the world below seemed present in that cloud.

A scare-thing, all crooked teeth and bulging eyes, grew out of the floor in front of Lucien. It blended back into the cloud as Uhura screamed.

"SO THE PEOPLE OF EARTH WOULD SPREAD THEIR EVILS EVEN UNTO OUR HOME? WE ARE READY THIS TIME FOR HUMAN PERFIDY. THIS TIME IT IS THE HUMANS WHO SHALL SUFFER . . . FOR HERE OUR POWER IS ABSOLUTE."

"THE HUMANS . . . AND YOU, LUCIEN," and the voice mocked the goat-man, "SHALL BE THE ONES TO PAY." It rose to a bansheelike wail on the last syllable, and stopped.

There was a powerful wrench, a jerk, and everyone had to grab quickly at something fixed to keep from being thrown to the deck. Kirk's gaze went immediately to the viewscreen.

The glowing gray cloud that had blocked them off from the planet had vanished. The *Enterprise* was dropping like a rock toward the angry surface below. It seemed certain they were going to smash to splinters on the packed sands, but the starship suddenly slowed, touched the ground awkwardly. A howling storm of rainbow-colored rain began to pour into the ship.

It was followed by fiery hailstones that rained down upon them as though the hull didn't exist. Everyone was knocked to the floor, including Lucien.

"Keep calm!" Kirk yelled dazedly, above the rattle of strangely soft hailstones.

An ominous rumbling sounded, and the *Enterprise* started to shake . . . slowly at first, then rapidly, until Kirk felt like an ingredient in a cake mix.

A shattering crack sounded, and the *Enterprise* split neatly down the middle, like a grape. Then the two halves of the starship started to change shape, to break up as Kirk, Spock, and McCoy had broken up at their first touch-down on Megas-tu. Smaller and smaller pieces detached and broke away, floating off into the screaming winds.

But this time the reforming was different. The floating bits of *Enterprise* regrouped to form, not the starship, but buildings—buildings lining a street that looked much like an old terran village. Very old.

"Seventeenth century," mumbled Kirk as he rematerialized. He felt himself caught in an awkward bent-over position, his

hands fixed up by his ears. He was fixed, he saw, in an ancient wooden device. Looking to his left, right, and across the street, he saw the entire crew of the *Enterprise*, set into similar stocks.

Row on row of the T-post structures faded into distant haze. Scott was trapped close by, as were Spock, McCoy, and Lucien. Kirk seemed to be at one end of the long line of imprisoned crew.

He turned his head to the right. There was a crudely engraved sign set in the ground beside a gnarled old oak.

SALEM, MASS., the sign said. It keyed no response in Kirk.

The world shimmered and dissolved again. Once more Kirk felt himself pulled lazily apart, reformed. Town and crew vanished. Dust walls formed around him, mortared with flickering bursts of energy.

Higher and higher the walls rose, solidifying into a huge, aged meeting hall, obviously terran in origin. But the scale was wrong. The room was big . . . much too big.

He was still bound in the wooden stocks, but a bench had been produced to sit on. He looked around once more and found Spock staring back at him.

"I know, Mr. Spock. Sixteenth-or-seventeenth-century terran architecture, I'd guess—with the size all out of proportion."

Spock tried to turn his head toward the Captain. "I saw the sign, also. If I recall your history correctly, Salem was a small town on the east coast of the North American continent. As for the date, I should guess approximately 1691."

" 'Approximately'?" echoed Kirk. "Why 1691?"

The first officer didn't reply. Instead, he concentrated on the seemingly endless tiers of seats facing them, seats that extended back and up to absurd distances. Perspective as well as proportion seemed distorted here.

The seats were beginning to fill with men and women, all clad in costumes of the same period as the hall.

Since everyone in the stocks was a member of the ship's crew, excepting Lucien, both Kirk and Spock concluded quickly that those filling the endless balcony were the Megans themselves. The reason for taking on human shape seemed

obvious. The reason for the particular period costumes did not.

There were hundreds, then thousands of them, and still they poured in, becoming tiny with increasing distance. Even so, Kirk found he could distinguish those in the furthest rows with perfect clarity. It made no sense—but he was beginning to accept such things as normal for Megas-tu.

The arrivals were talking solemnly among themselves. But when the last, uppermost seat had been filled, the buzz of low conversation died as if on signal.

A pause, and then a brilliant flare of light in the center of the room, before the first stocks. A last Megan appeared there, in human form. A tall, glowering man, wearing a wide-brimmed black hat.

The man surveyed the crew of the *Enterprise*, pinioned tightly in their wooden restraints, then turned to the watching Megans. His voice was deep, powerful . . . and familiar.

It was the voice that had erupted on the bridge only moments . . . days, years . . . before.

"WE ARE GATHERED HERE TODAY, GOOD CITIZENS, TO SEE JUSTICE DONE. YOU MUST BE THE JUDGES. THESE . . ." and he indicated those in the stocks, "ARE THE DEFENDANTS.

"AS REPRESENTATIVES OF THE VILEST SPECIES IN THE UNIVERSE . . . TRECHEROUS HUMANITY . . . THEY ARE TO BE JUDGED." He moved forward and stopped to stare grimly down at Lucien. ". . . AND THOSE WHO WOULD AID THEM." He turned away.

"AS SPECIALIST IN THE ETHICS OF MAGIC, I HAVE BEEN APPOINTED PROSECUTOR HERE." He started a complicated gesture, but Kirk, fighting with the unyielding wood, interrupted.

"If this is a trial, I think we've got the right to know what you're already so convinced we've done."

The tall prosecutor, who could have obliterated Kirk in a burst of yellow flame, nodded in agreement. He pointed toward Lucien.

"HAS THIS ONE NOT TOLD YOU HOW WE VISITED EARTH, AND WHAT WAS DONE TO US THERE?"

"Lucien said only that you came as wise men, wizards who . . ."

The Prosecutor leaned forward, shaking an angry fist.

"THEN HEAR THIS. ONCE, UPON YOUR WORLD, I WAS KNOWN AS ASMODEUS, WHO SEES ALL. GAZE UPON MY COUNTENANCE, SO THAT YOU, TOO, MAY KNOW THE TRUTH."

And the Prosecutor's face started to come apart. It expanded, flattened, became a swirling rectangular screen. A picture formed in it, the picture of the insane galaxy that roiled around Megas-tu.

Colors died to black, changed, and the view turned to one of breathtakingly normal space—space-black flecked with the brilliant points of distant stars.

Changed again, to a picture of Earth. Moved in close, closer. The Prosecutor spoke as various sequences appeared and played themselves out on the facial screen.

The first scenes depicted Megans in human guise engaged in numerous daily activities—as witches, sorcerers, and warlocks.

"WE CAME TO YOUR WORLD AS FRIENDS," the Prosecutor's voice boomed, "BUT WHEREVER WE WENT, THE STORY INVARIABLY HAD THE SAME ENDING. SOME HUMANS WOULD ATTEMPT TO USE US TO GAIN POWER, TO SERVE THEIR OWN GREED AND LUST. AND IN OUR IGNORANCE OF HUMAN WAYS, WE SOMETIMES FELL PARTY TO THESE SUBTLE INIQUITIES.

"WHEN WE DISCOVERED SUCH VENALITY AND REFUSED TO SERVE SUCH MEN, THEY TURNED THE PEOPLE AGAINST US, TAUGHT THE COMMON FOLK TO FEAR AND HATE US.

"SINCE OUR POWER IN YOUR UNIVERSE IS LIMITED, WE WERE VULNERABLE." The view changed to show Megans being driven from towns by the fearful populace, spat upon and reviled.

"THEY CALLED US DEVILS, DEMONS, CONJURERS!" the voice declaimed, rising to a shout. As it did so, the facial screen shattered into a thousand flickering particles, which faded back to nothingness.

The face of the Prosecutor reappeared.

"THOSE OF US WHO SURVIVED THESE EARLY PURGES," he continued, "DECIDED TO MAKE ONE FINAL ATTEMPT TO SECURE A HELPING COLONY ON YOUR WORLD. THEY GATHERED IN THE SMALL TOWN OF SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS.

"THERE, THOSE OF US WHO WERE LEFT DISCOVERED THAT IN TRYING TO LEARN YOUR WAYS, TO BLEND IN WITH YOU, WE HAD FORGOTTEN MUCH

KNOWLEDGE. EVEN SO, WE TRIED TO HELP YOU IN THIS NEWLY SETTLED LAND, BUT . . ."

"You made mistakes," guessed Spock.

"IT IS TRUE THERE WERE OCCASIONS WHEN WE USED OUR POWERS AWKWARDLY, AND MANY OF US SUFFERED AS A RESULT OF IT. SOME OF US . . . BURNED FOR IT. BURNED! AS WITCHES."

Kirk nodded sadly. The significance of Salem had come back to him.

"WE GATHERED THE SURVIVORS OF OUR SETTLEMENT OUTSIDE THE TOWN, AND TRIED TO RECALL ENOUGH MEGAN KNOWLEDGE TO RETURN TO OUR OWN UNIVERSE, TO LEAVE YOUR HELLISH WORLD. TO RETURN TO SAFETY, COMFORT, REASON . . ."

"And loneliness," put in Lucien, "and fear, and . . ."

"SHOULD WE NOT FEAR THE EARTHLINGS?" the Prosecutor insisted, "SHOULD WE NOT FEAR THE CRUELTY OF SUCH MINDLESS PRIMITIVES? CONSIDER THE WEAPONS THEY HAVE MASTERED, AND MISUSED, SINCE WE LEFT. NEVER SINCE HAVE WE ATTEMPTED TO EXPLORE YOUR UNIVERSE," he informed them, directing his attention to Kirk and Spock.

"NEVER SINCE HAVE WE SOUGHT OUTSIDE COMPANIONSHIP, TO IMPOSE OUR HELP ON THOSE WHOSE CREEDS ARE SUPERSTITION, GREED, AND TERROR. YET, DESPITE OUR CAUTION, YOU HAVE COME HERE, TO OUR VERY HOME."

"If one Federation ship can find us, so can others," Lucien whispered to Kirk. "That is what they fear."

The Prosecutor appeared to lose some of his antagonism. In fact, his thunder now held a surprising note of sadness.

"WE DO NOT WANT TO DO THIS, CAPTAIN KIRK. WE DO NOT WANT TO HARM YOU. THE NATURE OF OUR UNIVERSE IS ONE OF CONSTANT CHANGE, EVERYTHING IS TRANSITORY. SO ARE OUR GRUDGES. WE HAVE NEVER HAD TO HURT ANYONE BEFORE.

"IF THERE WERE SOME TRUE REASON NOT TO . . ." He turned, gazed back at the uncounted thousands who filled the distorted tiers of the hall, "WHO WILL SPEAK IN DEFENSE OF MANKIND? WHO?"

A slight whisper of bodies shifting on wooden seats was the only reply.

A familiar voice on Kirk's left broke the silence. "I will, Asmodeus. I am only partly of Earth." The Prosecutor moved near, seemed to inspect Spock.

" 'TIS TRUE ENOUGH. YOU ARE DIFFERENT. IF NONE OBJECT . . ." He looked back at the crowd. Still-silence still.

"THE COURT WILL THEN HEAR A DEFENSE." A casual gesture and Spock's stocks became so much sawdust.

The first officer stumbled on cramped legs at the sudden disappearance of the bonds. Then he straightened, rubbing at ankles and wrists.

"I have had no time to prepare a formal defense. I therefore request the court recess until . . ."

"RECESSS DENIEDDDD . . ." came a haunting moan from the gallery.

Spock didn't let any distress he may have felt at this unanimous rejection show. "I shall have to make do with the testimony of witnesses, then." The Prosecutor showed no inclination to offer any aid.

"I call Lucien as my first witness."

A second flare of released energy and Luden's stocks, too, vanished. Spock moved to stand in front of him. "Lucien, of all the Megans, you alone do not seem to fear or hate humans. On the contrary, you appear to like them very much. Why?"

"Because I'm a glutton for punishment," the goat-man replied, grinning. "No, this is not the time for levity, I suppose. I will try to be serious, though it's hard for me." He considered thoughtfully.

"I expect it's because they're so much like me, or I like them. Always questions to be answered! Like a child who continually questions his father, only to be asked, 'must there always be a reason for everything?' They are like that rare child who stares defiantly back up and says, 'yes!'

"I, too, am like that. And they have minds that never cease ranging outward, always seeking, striving to expand their store of knowledge . . . for knowledge's sake and not always for greed, as has been implied.

"It is these things that make them unique and endears them to me. But with us, it is different Every Megan is always alone, always existing self-confident, assured, in a singular sphere of certainty, Whereas humans, for all their vaunted individuality, are a true gregarious society. It seems to be something I need, this group association."

He started to pace back and forth before the first row of benches, glancing occasionally upward and back into the higher balconies.

"As you know, I was among the first to go among them. In Mesopotamia, Ur, Babylonia, Greece. In the river valleys of the Hwang and the Indus, I saw these bonds developing between them. An easy companionship that Megas-tu has never known and, sadly, can never know.

"I meant to help and change them, and ended by having them change me." He turned to look at Spock. "That's why I adopted you when you arrived. It was another chance to recover something I'd . . . lost."

"Thank you, Lucien," said a satisfied Spock. "One other witness, if you please. Captain James T. Kirk."

Flare-dissolve, and Kirk's stocks became a comfortable wooden chair.

"Tell the court, Captain. Would you say that humans have not changed since the time of Salem?"

Kirk was startled at how easily the words came, how relaxed he was, considering the gravity of the situation. "I think that we've been trying to, Spock. A little at a time.

"The certain virtues of humanity, which Lucien has elaborated on so flatteringly, go hand in hand with our faults —greed, envy, fear. We've learned a great deal about ourselves in the centuries since the witch trials. We try to understand and respect each other, no matter what a man's peculiarities. We try to understand and respect all life forms.

"And the human race has adopted a motto, a standard that at the time of Salem was only a dream in the minds of a few enlightened men." His own voice rose.

"KNOWLEDGE IS FREEDOM."

"Indeed, Captain," Spock agreed, speaking quietly into the resultant silence. "Could you elaborate on these new standards of man?"

Kirk stood, faced the endless gallery. "The records of the *Enterprise* are open for your inspection, citizens of Megas-tu. We couldn't hide them from you or alter them now even if we wished to.

"All the history of Earth and its Federation of worlds is at your disposal. Look at it . . . look at general order number one: *No starship may interfere with the normal development of any alien life form or society, whether advanced or primitive!*

"Even requests for aid by dying primitives are often frowned upon, in the belief that interference from outside often does more harm than good. Compare that with the Earth you once knew. And you may also compare—"

"ENOUGH!" The voice of the Megan Prosecutor rumbled through the pastel pit of the hall. A sparkling, whirling cloud formed in the center of the gallery, breaking up into tiny cloud-fragments. These shrank to become the entire records section of the *Enterprise*.

It hovered there . . . tapes, computer inserts, kilometers of microfilm. A gust of wind rose and scattered the knowledge like leaves across the thousands of benches, tumbling in and around the intent Megans.

"HERE IS YOUR HISTORY, HERE ARE YOUR RECORDS . . . EXHIBIT A FOR THE DEFENSE!" The Prosecutor gestured yet again. The blowing tapes and cassettes vanished once more.

"YOU HAVE HEARD AND YOU HAVE SEEN AND YOU KNOW," the Prosecutor told the vast chamber, "CITIZENS . . . HOW DECIDE YOU?" He went silent, his attitude one of intense concentration.

Kirk and Spock and the others also strained to hear, but it was as still as the inside of a cave. Whatever discussion was taking place could not be detected by mere human senses.

Oddly, Kirk found himself musing on the fact, not that his life and the lives of his crew lay in the balance, but that he had not had anything to eat since Lucien's picnic. He was getting hungry.

The concerns of the human body are not philosophical in nature.

"A DECISION HAS BEEN MADE, CAPTAIN JAMES KIRK." He forgot about food and leaned forward.

"IT IS YOUR ASTROPHYSICS SECTION AND NOT THE HISTORICAL ONE THAT IS THE DECIDING FACTOR. ACCORDING TO THOSE RECORDS, YOUR ENTRY HERE

TRULY WAS AN ACCIDENT OF EXPLORATION—AND ONE UNLIKELY TO BE SAFELY DUPLICATED.

"WITH THAT IN MIND, ADDED TO THE NEW EVIDENCE IN FAVOR OF MAN WHICH HAS BEEN PRESENTED, IT WOULD SEEM THAT WE OF MEGAS-TU ARE SAFE." He paused and his expression grew dark—literally.

"BUT LUCIEN MUST BE PUNISHED! FOR HIS BETRAYAL OF HIS PEOPLE AND THE DANGER HE HAS EXPOSED US TO. HE WHO WISHES COMPANIONSHIP SHALL BE CONFINED IN LIMBO FOR ALL ETERNITY!"

At those fateful final words a bubble of transparent red suddenly enveloped the goat-man. It pulsed softly with evidence of great power held under careful control. Without thinking, Kirk left his chair and rushed to the bubble's side.

"No—you can't. To isolate someone like Lucien—that's worse than sentencing him to death." The voice of the Prosecutor rose in volume and shrillness.

"DO YOU KNOW WHOM YOU DEFEND? DO YOU KNOW WHOSE COMFORT YOU SEEK? HE HAS TOLD YOU HIS NAME IS LUCIEN. WOULD YOU DEFEND HIM STILL IF YOU KNEW HIM BY ANOTHER NAME?

"INDEED IT WAS HE WHO WENT AMONG YOU AND SOUGHT YOUR FRIENDSHIP!" the voice laughed, "INDEED IT WAS HE WHO WORKED HIS MAGIC FOR YOU, IN HIS OWN WAYS. NO, IT SHALL NO LONGER BE.

"DOWN, LUCIFER!"

The goat-man leaned against the thin, impregnable walls of the bubble. Orange fire flared around his palms, terrible, all-destroying. But they could not break that shell. It started to rise.

Kirk's voice, when he had recovered from the initial shock of recognition and could speak again, was steady and determined.

"We're not interested in the remnants of legend and superstition, Prosecutor. I'd said we'd given such things up. He's a living, sentient being, an intelligent life-form, and he helped us. That's all I have to know about him. We'll not stand by and see him harmed for our past mistakes."

Tie Prosecutor gestured. A smoke-ring of blue energy appeared in the room and started to float toward Kirk. He twisted out of its way, and it changed direction like a thinking creature, pursuing him.

"SUBMIT TO THIS DECISION AND GO FREE, CAPTAIN. YOU HAVEN'T THE POWER TO FIGHT US."

"Captain!" urged Spock. "Use the magic you know." Kirk dodged around the base of the rising red bubble, the ring following. Suddenly, it looked as if he too were beginning to glow.

Little sparks and flashes of blue-green energy flickered and played around his body. Eyes a little drunk, he turned and gestured. A ball of green flame spun toward the Prosecutor.

A blading fire appeared over him, feeding on nothing. It started to descend. Kirk made another gesture, shouted, "Powers of Earth and Sky, Appear! An extreme low pressure system has been detected moving north-northeast!"

Thunder boomed, miniature lightning crackled, and a howling rainstorm drenched the chamber, putting out the lowering fire.

There was a smattering of applause from the gallery.

The scene began to flutter and change constantly, like a dance viewed under intermittent strobe light, as Kirk and the Prosecutor exchanged gestures.

One moment they were standing in a street of Salem Town —then they were back on the naked surface of Megas-tu. A raging sandstorm swallowed them up.

"High humidity and dampness!" Kirk intoned reverently as the abrasive sand tore at him. "Deciduous foliage marked by high rainfall . . .!"

Desert turned to jungle. But the Prosecutor was already counter-gesturing, and the jungle melted into deep blue ocean, the tops of trees turning into wave crests.

Kirk choked as he took in a startled mouthful of sea water. He felt himself drowning.

"YOU CANNOT BEST AN ENTIRE WORLD, CAPTAIN KIRK. THERE IS NO WAY YOU CAN WIN."

"I have to!" he shouted, then choked again. "Don't you see, Prosecutor, you'll become as bad as the primitive humans you feared. A moment ago you said you'd never found it necessary to harm another being. But now you're going to do so, acting out of terror instead of the higher morals you always insisted you, and not we Earthmen, possessed!"

Floating high above the waves, the Prosecutor paused only a second before gesturing.

The world vanished.

Kirk found himself suddenly dry. The great hall was gone. He was back on the surface of the real Megas-tu. Colored particles and sand swirled harmlessly around him.

In the distance he could see the *Enterprise*, reassembled and whole. Behind him was the forest and the fairy city. The sand vanished, and he was standing on a green lawn with Spock and the Prosecutor. Lucien was there, too, still encased in the red bubble.

Even as he watched, the transparent prison began to dissolve.

"THE MOST MAGIC LIES ALWAYS IN YOUR HEART, HUMAN," mused the Prosecutor, no longer a threatening figure, "YOU WERE PREPARED TO DIE FOR LUCIEN, A BEING WHO IS ALIEN TO YOU AND WHOSE RACIAL MEMORIES TO YOU ARE NOT THE BEST."

"I was sure you would do something at least as foolish, friend Kirk," the goat-man smiled. "It wouldn't have been human of you not to. I told them their fears of you were groundless. But they are so cautious now—not like us." For a being just threatened with limbo, he seemed remarkably cheerful.

"How could you be so certain the Captain would react the way he did?" asked a curious Spock.

There was a twinkle in Lucien's eye. "I know my humans. Their inconsistencies are the most predictable of all."

"I don't understand," began Kirk, but the Prosecutor smiled as he interrupted.

"THIS LAST WAS A TEST OF YOUR TRUE SELVES, CAPTAIN. HOW RIGHT YOU WERE WHEN YOU REMINDED ME OF OUR OWN WORDS, THAT WE COULD NOT INTENTIONALLY DO HARM TO OTHERS.

"WE HAD TO BE CERTAIN YOUR RECORDS WERE NO RUSE. THEY MIGHT HAVE BEEN DOCTORED BEFORE YOU ENTERED THE VORTEX. WE HAVE BEEN TRICKED TOO MANY TIMES TO TAKE CHANCES."

"I see now," nodded Spock. "You had to have incontrovertible proof that not only man's laws had changed, but that man himself had." He turned to Kirk. "Your compassion for Lucien was that proof, Captain."

"IF YOUR PEOPLE SHOULD CHANCE TO VISIT US AGAIN, CAPTAIN KIRK, WE SHALL DO OUR BEST TO WELCOME THEM. THE LIFTING OF THIS FEAR IS A GREAT THING. YOU HAVE GIVEN BACK TO US SOME OF WHAT YOUR ANCESTORS TOOK AWAY. WE SHALL PROVIDE YOU WITH THE EXTRADIMENSIONAL BOOST YOU WILL REQUIRE TO REENTER YOUR OWN UNIVERSE."

"And I'll give you something to make the changeover a little easier!" roared Lucien. He gestured, and tankards appeared in everyone's hand.

"A favorite archaic Earth custom of mine, Asmodeus. A toast—to a new friendship, and to the lifting of old fears." He tilted his head, raised his own huge container, and let the liquid run down his throat, chin, and beard.

Kirk did his best to imitate him, in spirit if not capacity. Spock sipped delicately at his own, and shook his head in wonder at the attractions of excessive alcoholic consumption . . .

The universe was unchanged. Stars lay like gold flecks at the bottom of a prospector's pan, shining steadily through the lambent background of radiant nebulae.

Compared to this glory, the object that suddenly burst into the central galactic quadrant from out of a peculiar confluence of force lines was unrelievedly dull.

To those who rode in it, however, this miniscule symmetrical blot—the *Enterprise*—was a more perfect jewel than the greatest star.

As before, the central viewscreen on the bridge could capture only a small section of the glowing panorama.

"Report, Mr. Scott," said Kirk crisply, leaning over to speak into the pickup grid in the command chair arm. The chief engineer's voice responded from another part of the starship.

"All systems operative, Captain. Warp-engines performing perfectly. Everything's operatin' at maximum efficiency again. It wasn't too hard." There was a pause. "I only had to sacrifice a chicken and two goats to the central computer."

"Very funny, Scotty," Kirk said dryly as the chiefs chortle floated back over the intercom. He switched it off in mid-chortle.

"No more magic for us, Jim," a relieved McCoy declared from Kirk's side. He gestured at the screen. "It's all back there, and there it can stay, for all I care. Though I won't be so quick to laugh at any alien witch doctors we may meet up with in the future."

For awhile they simply enjoyed the retreating magnificence of the galactic center, a torrent of raw, untappable energy. It seemed it existed only for their visual pleasure, now.

"I'm not a particularly religious man, Jim," McCoy murmured after several minutes of contemplative consideration of the vast spectacle, "but do you think that Lucien was really the ancient devil-demon some men called Lucifer? Or was it all an act, a guise he liked to assume for his own amusement?"

"You mean," Kirk asked, "did Lucien pattern himself after the myth, or did the myth arise out of Lucien? I don't know, Bones. Does it matter?"

"Oh, I suppose not." McCoy was quiet for a few minutes more, before speaking idly again.

"It's just that—if he was, Jim—this would be the second time he was on the verge of being cast out. But thanks to you, this is the first time he was saved."

Kirk looked sharply back at McCoy. There was no sign of a smile on the doctor's face. He started to say something, caught himself, and returned his attention to the viewscreen instead. He had other things to think about.

They had a long way to go.

ONCE UPON A PLANET

(Adapted from a script by Len Janson and Chuck Menville)

I

The officer entered the tent and came unbidden to full attention. For several moments he stood quietly, his eyes never wavering from the tall, impressive figure seated behind the old scarred table. But old campaigner or not, he found himself beginning to fidget. Perhaps his entrance had gone unnoticed. A slight cough as prelude, maybe . . .

"The troops are assembled as you ordered, sir. They're waiting for you."

"Thank you, Centurion," came the warm reply. Caesar did not look up immediately. The battle map sketched out on the tabletop still commanded the full attention of the greatest tactician Rome would ever know.

Their situation was not yet grave, but every hour's delay strengthened the position of the enemy as fresh rebels rallied to their cause.

On the right flank lay the traitor Aranius with his cavalry. To the north Ventrigorix was positioned with the Belgians. A scout had just ridden in with reports of catapults concealed in the high forest to their left that was laden with Greek fire which blackened men and panicked horses.

If their own mounted were dispatched to deal with Aranius' renegades, the thrust of any main assault at the enemy's center would be weakened. Besides, sending even a portion of them to deal with the hidden catapults, whose strength was uncertain, would lessen possibly crucial reserves needed for a decisive conflict. A flank attack would surely follow any center attack, and the entire cavalry would be needed to turn it.

A rising din was heard from outside the tent. Veterans all, the men of the XIIth, XXth, and XXIInd legions had been goaded to a fighting fever by their officers. They were anxious to do battle. To leave them standing while further tactics were deliberated would be folly.

Cries of "Caesar, Caesar!" rose steadily in volume as the troops gave vent to their emotions. The leader of the Roman

army thought once more about the vital holocaust ahead.

If this campaign were successful, it would finally break the back of barbarian resistance in northern Gaul. The way would be open to the ice-bound lands across the northern seas, bringing the whole continent under the iron control of Imperial Rome once and for all.

Caesar grinned wolfishly. Then let those limp-wristed Senators and Patricians try to chip away at the Emperor's powers! Rome would see a triumph it would never forget.

Caesar's decision was made even before the fist slammed down onto the table. Eyes rose along with the battle-hardened torso to stare evenly at the tensely waiting centurion.

"Flavius, the moment is at hand. We march!"

Snapping to a position of attention the centurion's right arm shot up and out in salute. The words he had been waiting for —the words three legions of Rome's finest troops had been waiting for.

"Hail, Caesar," he intoned admiringly. "Your legions await your command."

And this was more than rhetoric, for by now the tent was all but swaying to the combined shouts of thousands of massed soldiers.

Donning his helmet, Caesar buckled on the short sword, adjusted a chinstrap, and strode toward the waiting thunder to address her men . . .

"What's the matter with you, Yeoman?" asked a worried Lt. Davis. "Haven't you got that stand-by program for the menu worked out yet?"

Yeoman Deb Colotti blinked and looked up from her dream.

"What . . .? Sorry, Lieutenant. My . . . my mind was floating."

"That's because it's lighter than air," snapped the section chief. She glanced over Colotti's shoulder and tapped a finger on the bright digital readout.

"Code SCRP-D-220. You've just programmed two hundred and twenty chocolate raisin pies into the month's menu. And

the captain hates chocolate raisin pie. Get busy and fix it."

"Yes, ma'am." Colotti shook her head at her own idiocy and started in on the tedious task of erasing and resetting the faulty program she had just fed into the *Enterprise*'s galley computer.

Dry leaves crackled like brown foil underfoot and N'gombi froze. Behind him, the other four men of the hunting party did likewise, becoming as motionless as the surrounding trees of the great rain forest. Much care was necessary here, on the very edge of the veldt. Only anxious eyes continued to move, searching, probing nervously into the surrounding wall of green.

The hunting party remained frozen in place several minutes longer before moving forward again. Almost immediately N'gombi threw up a warning hand. A clear section of soft, rain-soaked earth lay in front of them. Kneeling, he examined the track left in the drying mud.

A sniff, loose earth crumbled appraisingly between sensitive fingers. "Fresh . . . very fresh," he muttered.

His senses wholly alert, N'gombi looked up and into the forest. The spoor was barely minutes old. Behind him he could feel the tenseness of the others as they waited for his words.

All were brave men—the bravest of the village. But they had no stomach for this kind of work and none could blame them. Especially in dense undergrowth where a group had no room to spread out and maneuver, where death could sneak smell-close to strike and crush and rend before a man could turn to see.

Only the willingness of the great slayer N'gombi had given them enough courage, enough to go too. But even with the quiet assured presence of their greatest hunter, the sudden absence of normal jungle sounds—the monkey cries and the shrieking of brilliant-plumed parrots—was frightening them.

N'gombi rose and started to step over the track. As he did so, a frightening crashing sounded in the foliage to their left. For a moment the party held. Then, screaming in fear and sudden panic, the other four hunters dropped their spears and ran for their lives retreating back down the path.

Turning quietly, N'gombi grounded his spear-butt firmly into the dirt, knelt on one knee, and braced the hardwood shaft . . . and waited.

Like a falling sandstone cliff, the tawny form of the huge rogue lion exploded out of the brush and at him . . .

Subengineer Duchamps shouldered his overchalked cue and stared curiously across the green-felt-covered table.

"You're not on your game today, Henry. That's the fourth round of eight-ball I've taken from you this morning."

"Yeah," agreed security guard Henry Ndugu, observing idly that his partner had indeed swept the table surface clean. "Guess I can't concentrate."

"Don't wonder why," nodded Duchamps knowingly. He glanced at the chronometer on his wrist as he swung the cue free. "Must be only a couple of hours out by now." He sighed deeply.

"I'm having a hard time keeping my attention on the game, too. But I figure I might as well fulfill at least one fantasy right now. It's nice to beat you for a change. Rack 'em up . . ."

In the pilot house, Captain Benjamin O. Lee puffed nervously on his pipe and glanced out of the corner of an eye at his pilot. Strange sort of chap, this pilot, giving up a promising literary career just to come back to his home town and sign on with a dirty old steamboat.

But the fellow seemed steady enough. Lee was damned happy to have him. Had the surest eyes and steadiest hands on the river.

It was a quiet summer day. Just enough of a breeze wafted over the river to keep the humidity from killing. From the iron stacks, gritty black smoke seemed to rise vertically into otherwise azure sky. The *Cairo* was entering a sharp bend in the channel.

Noticing the direction of the captain's eyes, the pilot smiled that funny, wry smile of his. "Don't worry, Cap'n. Well get through easy as my grandfather's old ram."

"I sure hope so, Sam. Never seen the big muddy this low. If those folks at Paducah don't get these medical supplies and that new vaccine we've got on B-deck, well . . ." His eyes lowered.

"Now I told you not to worry, Cap'n. I know every log, every sandbar and old wreck this river's ever belched up. She's never played me false yet, and I don't see her doin' it now. Even so," and he eyed the swirling, muddy water ahead where a narrow stream entered the main course, "it'd be good to take a sounding about here."

The captain nodded. Something at least to take his mind off less happy thoughts. Leaning out the side window of the pilot house he shouted forward.

"Mr. Hansen . . . take a sounding!"

"Aye, Cap'n!" came the mate's reply. The Swede uncoiled the measured, weighted line and chucked it easily over the bow, slightly to port. He checked the line markings as the paddle-wheeler pushed steadily ahead.

"Mark Twain!" he called back toward the bridge. The pilot nodded and turned the wheel slightly to starboard. His eyes, perpetually twinkling under bushy brows, looked skyward. If the weather held they'd make Paducah in plenty of time . . .

"Not much point in letting a recorder run if you're not going to use it," observed Yeoman Lancer.

Ensign Ub Jackson started, looked up, suddenly aware that the screen in front of him was illuminated but quite blank, patiently awaiting instructions.

"Sorry, Lily. Seems I just can't turn out any poetry today."

"What's the matter?" She checked the list of suggestive titles available on another unoccupied viewer, and resolutely turned away from it. Best save her fantasies for the real thing. "No inspiration?"

By way of answer Jackson activated the recorder. But instead of slipping in a program cassette, he dialed the image currently displayed on the main viewscreen up on the bridge.

The screen fluttered momentarily, then cleared to reveal a blue-white world draped in a delicate peignoir of clouds. It had grown visibly since the last time he had looked at it.

"No," he finally replied, eyeing the approaching planet longingly, "too much of it."

"Captain's Log, stardate 5510.1," Kirk informed the patient pickup at his wrist He paused, glancing around the quietly efficient bridge. Spock, Uhura, Sulu, and Arex were occupied preparing for orbital insertion, each at his respective station. Dr. McCoy stood at Arex's shoulder, peering past the helmsman at their destination.

"The crew of the *Enterprise*," he continued, satisfied that everything and everyone was operating normally, "is ready for some well-deserved rest and recreation. And the sooner the better. Mr. Spock informs me that normal ship efficiency is down twenty-two percent from the standard level—due in part to anticipation of Omicron planetfall."

That was an understatement. Ship's personnel were so involved in plotting out the elaborate fantasies they hoped to enjoy once down on the surface of that azure ceramic world that only automatic instrumentation kept the *Enterprise* in working order.

"Having secured the situation on Phylos and submitted the information concerning the mutant clone Stavos Keniclius V and mutant Spock Two—clone of our own first officer—to Starfleet sector headquarters, I requested that the crew be granted something special in the way of shore leave. Said request to visit the Omicron region was duly submitted and approved.

"Course was set and traced without incident. We are now approaching that so-called 'shore-leave' world.

"Those studying this log may recall that this particular planet was programmed long ago by some unknown but highly advanced alien race. The extremely complex machinery installed there is designed solely to provide fun and amusement for interstellar passersby.

"Its extensive mind-reading devices and attendant manufacturing machinery are capable of materializing any fantasy they can pick up. I confess to looking forward to our return to this planet myself."

Switching off the recorder Kirk sat back and watched his fellow officers at work. Although they betrayed no outward emotion, Kirk was certain they shared the same feelings of expectation he did.

As he stared at the earthlike globe floating in the center of the main viewscreen, his mind relaxed for the first time in weeks. At last they would have a real rest, unencumbered by requests to explore, aid, fight, or otherwise exercise themselves on behalf of Federation policy.

Matter of fact, a little anticipatory daydreaming wouldn't hurt right now . . .

The *Enterprise* was run on three eight-hour shifts. Her crew would take a shore leave the same way. A games computer served to scramble a complete roster of personnel and then print out one lucky third of them.

Uhura, Sulu, and McCoy were all in the first group scheduled for beam down. McCoy in particular made no effort to hide his pleasure in being among the first of the ship's complement permitted to sample the dream-satisfying pleasures ahead.

The outcome did not sit very well with Engineer Scott, however. He looked up disapprovingly from his station behind the transporter console.

"You needn't look so smug about it, Doctor."

"Now, Scotty, no need to be jealous. You're due to beam down with the next group anyway, aren't you?"

Scott shook his head mournfully. "Uh-uh . . . I'm in the third shift."

"Too bad. Well, we'll try not to use up the planet." He grinned and followed Uhura and Sulu into the transporter alcove.

Scott started to activate the transporter controls but paused at the sight of a familiar object slung over Sulu's right shoulder. He stared at it curiously. "This is supposed to be a pleasure stop, Lieutenant Sulu. Why the science tricorder?"

"I thought you knew, Chief. Botany's one of my hobbies. Oh, you can't be sure about much of anything down there, but lots of the plants are native. And the planetary computer's had the green thoughts of thousands of alien visitors to draw

on to grow others. Not everybody's fantasies are lurid garden-of-eden types. Mine's just plain gardens."

Scott shrugged. "Each to his own, I suppose. Seems like a bit of a waste to me, though." His voice assumed a conspiratorial tone. "Now, when my turn comes I plan to . . ."

"If you don't mind I'd really rather do without the juicy details, Chief," Uhura interrupted sharply. "We've all got our own dreams to indulge, and we can't do it standing here."

"Ummmm, is that a subtle hint, lass?" Scott smiled wickedly. "Sorry." He activated three levers, twirled switches and knobs. The three officers, complete with separate fantasies, turned into three multicolored pillars of shifting particles.

These reformed later, touching down amid a landscape of ethereal beauty. This particular section of the planet had been planted and tossed and sculpted and rearranged to look like a Bierstadt canvas. Foliage here had been groomed by the touch of a master stylist. Thick grassy meadows and small brooks alternated as far as one could see. Miniature waterfalls lifted from Japanese prints (or the memory of same) provided delicately orchestrated background music. Here and there trees blended harmoniously into the meadows, trees grown as much for symmetry as for shade. Some were draped loosely with climbing vines that were festooned in turn with blooms of gold, green, and tyrolean purple. In the distance, part-way up a gradual slope, they saw a vibrating, glittering flash of color. Another landing party beaming down. Even further away, on the other side of a gentle river, yet a third group arrived. Flashes continued intermittently at a rapidly increasing range as the *Enterprise*'s transporters freckled the surface with landing parties of would-be lotus-eaters.

McCoy took a few experimental steps, turning in a slow circle to take in views of the high, snow-capped mountains that surrounded this valley. Were those distant peaks the result of natural upheaval—or were they planned on some master map by contouring computers buried deep beneath their feet? There was no way to tell.

At the foot of the mountains ran a long, clear lake, positioned like a mirror to best reflect the towering crags and pinnacles. It, at least, looked too perfect to be anything but

the result of some other geologically inclined traveler's idealized dreamscape.

McCoy nodded to himself, completely satisfied. "Just as gorgeous as I remember it. Doesn't look like anything's changed, not a leaf, not a blade of grass."

They started walking toward the nearest little stream. It bubbled capriciously down a hillside that looked misty where there was no mist. That puzzled Sulu. He'd seen this slope before somewhere. But where?

In a painting, of course, and the image came to him abruptly. This hillside, those trees and rockfalls, the stream, had been designed once before, by a long-dead terran artist . . . Masefield . . . no, Maxfield Parrish.

Seeing it in all three dimensions was startling.

"This looks a lot like the same spot we set down at on our first visit," he ventured. Then the helmsman smiled, recalling a fantasy other than his own.

"Remember when we saw the white rabbit, Doctor?"

McCoy chuckled before replying. "It's not the sort of thing you forget. Sure I remember, Sulu. And all because I said this place made me feel like a character out of *Alice in Wonderland*."

Suddenly they were unexpectedly interrupted. It wasn't quite a human voice, but more like a caricature of one. A high piping wail that was half-child, half-senator.

"One side, one side!"

McCoy spun around and barely cleared the path in time as a meter-tall white rabbit clad in top hat and tails bounded past. The rabbit was holding onto his bobbing hat with one hand and clutching tightly to an oversized gold pocket watch with the other. His manner and tone were agitated, his bouncy stride hurried.

"I'm late, I'm late! Oh my fuzzy ears and whiskers, I'm very very late!"

Repetition of a previous incident or not, Sulu, McCoy, and Uhura stood gaping at the furry apparition as it shot past. The rabbit unexpectedly left the path and, with a hop of Olympian proportions, sailed into the thick shrubbery.

Moments later, naturally, a young girl emerged seemingly from nowhere on the path in front of them. She had long blond hair neatly combed to her waist, and she wore a light blue dress with matching white pinafore, knee-high socks, and shiny black buckled shoes.

By the time she had come close enough to tap Uhura on the shoulder, they'd all recovered from the initial surprise.

"I beg your pardon," the girl said politely in a thick British-terran accent, "but did you happen to see a large white rabbit come this way?"

Uhura pointed toward the concealing bushes. "He went that way, Alice."

"Thank you so much!" She performed a perfect little curtsey and hurried off down the path, disappearing into the same bushes as the rabbit. Sulu and McCoy exchanged charmed smiles.

"Just like you said, Doctor, nothing's changed."

Uhura smiled agreement, then shook her head in wonderment. "They're such perfect models, so exact—and they appear so quickly in response to your thoughts. It's hard to believe they're not real."

"Easy, Lieutenant," cautioned McCoy, but gently. "They're only highly sophisticated robots, whipped up by this world's central computer to make your dreams come true."

"I know," she responded. "I wish I could have a look at their insides. Imagine the technology required to direct and guide them, without any sign of receiving or transmitting apparatus. Nothing in the Federation comes close to it." She paused at a sudden thought, and Sulu and McCoy stopped to watch her.

"I wish," she began, spacing her words deliberately, "I could see their insides, especially the transmit-receive instrumentation." They waited, but the hidden ears of the planet chose not to give a response.

"I said," she repeated firmly, "I *wish* to see the insides of one of the automatons."

Sulu shook his head. "Forget it, Uhura. But it was a nice idea." She smiled ruefully back at him.

"I guess granting your heart's desire doesn't include giving away trade secrets. The planetary machinery will do just about anything, except explain itself. Oh well." She shrugged philosophically, then smiled.

"This won't do—acting disappointed. Got to think only happy thoughts."

"My prescription exactly," McCoy agreed. "Speaking of which . . ." He looked slightly embarrassed. "Part of the pleasure of being on this world is indulging in your most private fantasies, to the hilt. That requires a certain amount of, uh . . ."

"Privacy," supplied Sulu. "Just what I was going to say."

"And I," Uhura added, making it unanimous.

"Not that I'm not crazy about both of you," the good doctor retorted hastily, "but when I see you again I'd just as soon we were back on the ship."

The three starship officers split up amiably then, taking off in three different directions, searching out three different paths through the manicured lawns—each in search of a place where secret dreams could be enjoyed away from the rest of humanity.

Exotic blossoms bordered the bubbling rivulet, petals straining so hard to catch the sun that some bloomed even under the clear surface of the stream. They existed nowhere else in the universe, having been cultivated and grown first in the field of the mind.

A faint tinge of rose tinted the otherwise diamond-clear water, and thick clover sighed with the action of wind on a billion waiting-stems. The scene required only its creator for completeness.

Uhura furnished that seconds later as she topped the rise that concealed the perfect valley and then started down toward the stream.

She stared down, down, into the water. A wavering rippled reflection of self looked back at her. Reaching out, the reflection grasped the water-distorted mirror-image of a large black flower and plucked it free, setting it into the hair above one ear. Then it smiled up at Uhura.

Humming softly, she imitated the suggestive action of her reflection. Breaking off the self-same flower she set it neatly over the indicated ear. Still humming softly to herself, she started to stroll upstream.

Immense was the forest, with gnarled trees impossibly thick and tall. Like bark-backed skyscrapers they soared hundreds of meters into the sky. Their distant crests seemed to support the blue heavens on thick, brown branches.

Sulu rounded one colossal bole and leaned to study the moss growing on its side. Here the wood was the shade of obsidian, the iron-hard black fluted and ribboned with channels, the touch smooth as oiled ivory. Yet when he pressed in, the black bark gave way obediently.

Delicate dark vines encircled many of the towering trees. They dangled freely from the lowest branches. Each was composed of segments, like a chain. When a lithe breeze gusted, the links would bounce against one another, tinkling with a sound of small porcelain chimes. It was the only sound in the forest.

Light shafted down in yellow ranks between the trunks, and the effect was like walking through a cathedral. Transparent flowers grew here and there from high bushes. Whenever they caught the light they made presents of rainbows to the helmsman's delighted eyes. The rest of the undergrowth was riotous, wild, every bit as impressive in its own way as the massive trees.

Once, a tiny fuzzy plant pulled itself out of the ground and started to follow him, scurrying along in pursuit on tiny mobile roots. Sulu grinned at the memory that had produced it. Then he bent, lifted it easily in one hand. Tiny thorns pricked futilely at his palm. Bringing both hands together, he slowly ground the fuzzy into a handful of yellow powder.

One puff was sufficient to send the dust floating away. Sulu rubbed his hands together as he continued through the forest. A lilting tune came unbidden to his lips. His singing voice might not have been good, but it was enthusiastic, and the chiming vines seemed to join right in.

Thick twisted cypress alternated politely with slim, zebra-striped birch. Like the hair of a goddess, Spanish moss fell in emerald waves from the thicker trees, almost touching the ground. Somewhere an oriole chirped a greeting as McCoy turned a bend in the lane. He stopped to absorb the view.

Ahead, set on a low hill surrounded by well-tended green lawns and a newly painted white picket fence, was a magnificent cream-colored mansion. It was two-stories high and faced with smooth, pseudoclassical columns. Honeysuckle, wisteria, and magnolia bloomed in profusion around the front gate. The flowers tangled around the fence and climbed up the fronting columns, alternating with thick ivy and filling the air with scents of sugar and sweet wine. Somewhere, someone was plunking a banjo and singing.

McCoy sighed and stared longingly at the distant panorama, resolutely putting out of his mind the fact that the front was probably false, the ivy artificial, and the banjo-plucker a hidden recording.

"Lovely . . . they just don't make 'em like that anymore." He started toward the mansion and was wondering who would greet him at the door, when a harsh female voice shattered the antebellum tranquility.

"Off with his head!"

McCoy spun around in surprise. What greeted him was no less unlikely but a good deal more startling than the plantation now behind him. A large crowd of oddly shaped humanoids returned his stare. Their gaze was openly hostile.

Each body was a perfect rectangle save only for five bulges —head, arms, and legs. Their torsos were tremendously broad, impossibly thin, and inscribed with archaic symbols: hearts, diamonds, spades, and clubs.

The unmistakable leader of this angry horde was somewhat less broad and rather less narrow. She stepped out of their midst and jabbed an accusing finger at McCoy.

"There he is!" she shrieked. "Off with his head!"

Lowering their lances, the card-shaped humanoids charged forward on stumpy legs.

It was all a dazed McCoy could do to duck just as a lance tipped with a razor-edged heart sailed over his head, cutting a

small sapling behind him neatly in half. It suddenly occurred to the *Enterprise*'s chief physician that the intentions of this multiple fantasy were other than benign.

"Hey, what's going on here?" Something brushed his right arm and slammed into the large tree behind. This one was finished with a dark spade-shape, half of which was buried in the wood. McCoy glanced down at his side, saw that the spear had taken a neat slice out of his tunic. That did it. He had no intention of hanging around to argue with a belligerent dream, especially when it wasn't his. He turned and took off down the path on the dead run.

"Stop him!" yelled the Queen. The cards had already taken off in hot pursuit, and the pack of humanoids was close on McCoy's heels.

Occasionally a long lance arched through the air near him. Fortunately the aim of his pursuers was not good. Their short arms did not permit much in the way of long-range accuracy. McCoy had no intention of giving them a chance to sharpen their skills at close range. With his longer legs McCoy was able to maintain and even slightly lengthen his lead. But he was no athlete and he couldn't keep up this chase indefinitely, whereas the animated cards could probably run all day.

Fumbling at his belt he finally managed to pull the communicator free. It took him three frantic tries before the cover snapped back, but by then he was panting so hard that the words refused to form.

Finally, however, he managed to gasp between breaths, "*Enterprise*—emergency, emergency! Beam up, beam up!"

The filtered shouts sounded clearly over the speaker in the transporter room. Fortunately Scott was on station there, alert for just such a call. Not that the chief engineer had suddenly acquired the gift of precognition. It was standard procedure, ever since the amazing properties of the shore-leave world had become known, to have someone standing by at the transporter at all times. Some crewmembers got bored early and had to be beamed back before their rest time was expired.

But the real reason for the precaution was that one or two members of a ship's complement often could not handle the confrontation with their own fantasies. Though they were in

no danger of physical harm, a real chance of serious mental damage existed unless they could be brought back aboard in time.

But this sounded like McCoy—one of the last people Scott expected to have to bring back early. He didn't sound bored, and if one person on the *Enterprise* was well qualified to handle his own fantasies, it was the ship's head medical officer.

Still, there was no arguing with that emergency call. McCoy had apparently not strayed far from the original set-down point—he had hardly had time—and Scott located him quickly. Then a hand was moving on one of the controlling levers.

McCoy, panting heavily, dodged around a thick oak. An improbable, scythe-headed lance shot through the space he had occupied a moment before. He looked over his shoulder. They had gotten behind him somehow, and now a handful of the cards were moving toward him.

Desperately McCoy searched for a way out, took a step sideways. If he could make the stream—there was always a chance the cards hadn't been programmed to swim. Then he started to scream.

A hurled lance was coming straight at his face.

It reached him.

II

Uhura blinked and stared at her own communicator as if it had suddenly started talking to her with a mind of its own. She had been preparing to call in and make certain all was well with Lt. M'ress in communications, when the sound of McCoy's emergency call had been relayed automatically to her over the open channel.

She paused by a small waterfall. What could there be on this paradise world to menace anyone? Despite the obvious urgency of McCoy's call, her attention stayed divided between the communicator and the liquid jewel set into the hillside.

"Uhura to transporter room, come in, please." M'ress could wait. First she ought to find out what was the trouble with McCoy.

In one instant the scene was normal, complete. Grass, her hand, the communicator, tiny flowers at her feet. Then a long metal shape inserted itself into her view. Taking the communicator effortlessly from her grasp, it closed pewter-toned digits. There was an ugly crackling sound, and the tough device was pulverized into tiny fragments of metal and mangled components.

She turned and gave a little gasp of surprise.

The hovercraft was not very big. Just about a meter high and long, it floated off the ground quite close to her. It sported six mechanical arms of varying length. Each was equipped with different nodes and knobs at its end. The function of five of them remained a mystery. The sixth had been used to crush the communicator.

Electronic lenses—light sensors or true artificial eyes, she couldn't tell which—ringed the efficient-looking machine. So far it hadn't threatened her, hadn't moved at all except to destroy the communicator.

She took a couple of uncertain steps away from it. The muted hum the automaton generated rose slightly in pitch, and it moved to follow her, a silent steel-eyed spider.

Kirk lolled in the command chair and glared at the main viewscreen. At the moment it displayed a vivid rectangular field of nothing. And he worried. Spock sat nearby, while Arex sat at the navigation console and tried to look busy. M'ress rested at the communications station and nervously ran her claws across the metal board in front of her.

Finally the elevator opened, and McCoy and Sulu hurried in. Kirk swiveled. He noticed the doctor's torn sleeve immediately. It was a neat cut, and you didn't have to be a botanist to see that it hadn't been produced by any interfering branch.

"What happened down there, Bones?"

McCoy was clearly bewildered and making no attempt to conceal the fact. "I can't understand it, Jim. Everything looked exactly the same as last time. It behaved exactly as last time. We even met Alice and the White Rabbit again.

"So we split up, each to his own fantasy-world. Everything proceeded beautifully—for Sulu and me, at least." That triggered another thought, and the doctor glanced around the bridge. "Say, where is Uhura, anyway?"

"Hasn't come back yet," supplied Kirk helpfully, "but we haven't received any emergency call from her, nor from any of the other shore parties. Lt. Sulu just happened to have come back on his own, to drop off his specimens and get a bigger collecting pouch. Go on."

"Everything was happening just as I wished it would, when suddenly this army of animated playing cards appeared out of nowhere. Only they weren't playing." He fingered his torn sleeve.

"I nearly got aced, Jim." Nobody smiled.

"Animated cards?" The doctor nodded.

"Led by the Queen of Hearts herself."

"The Queen of Hearts and her army of cards are characters from *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, Captain," Spock informed him.

"I just remembered myself, Spock. I read the book as a child. But I wasn't aware that you were attracted to the literature of the fantastic. I thought general and hard science was more your style."

"Light reading is considered relaxing, as well as mentally healthful," the first officer replied. "My mother was particularly fond of Lewis Carroll's work." He looked thoughtful. "Considering the realities of life on Vulcan, it is not surprising that a good deal of her reading tended to the opposite extreme."

"I understand." Kirk turned back to confront McCoy. "Bones, you said you'd already entered your own fantasy of the moment. You weren't thinking about that book?"

"Absolutely not! As a matter of fact, I distinctly recall thinking how beautiful and peaceful and right everything was. And then before you know it, it's 'Off with his head!' *My* head." He added by way of rapid afterthought, "No comments from you, Spock."

Spock protested mildly. "I was not about to say anything, Doctor."

"Mr. Sulu," Kirk continued, shifting his attention to the helmsman, "did you experience anything out of the ordinary—that is, anything out of the ordinary you didn't wish for? Was there anything in your fantasy that either didn't belong there, or acted antagonistically?"

"No, sir. The contrary, if anything."

"Well then—" Kirk halted in midsentence as Scott's voice sounded over the open communicators.

"Transporter room to Captain Kirk." He thumbed the respond switch.

"Kirk here. What is it, Scotty?"

"Captain, contact has been lost with Lieutenant Uhura. I can't get a fix on her anywhere. She's still down on the surface, but the monitor signal from her communicator has disappeared."

"Sensor scan, Mr. Spock," Kirk said curtly.

"Yes, Captain." Spock turned his eyes and attention to his hooded viewer, began working controls. Kirk turned back and spoke into the pickup.

"Scotty, retrieve all landing parties immediately. All leaves are cancelled."

"Aye, Cap'n. But what'll I tell the rest of the crew?" The chief engineer sounded concerned. "Some of the second shift

are already pressin' me to slip them down a few minutes earlier."

"You can tell them there's an emergency, Scotty," Kirk suggested, "but don't specify its nature. If anyone presses you for details, tell them it doesn't seem to be serious."

Scott didn't reply immediately, and Kirk could visualize the chief engineer's face, a mask of hesitation. He didn't believe in white lies anymore than in white rabbits. But Kirk knew the chief would see his way toward rationalizing the situation. They didn't know that Uhura was in any trouble; they only knew that her signal had gone out. It might be a mechanical malfunction.

"All right, Cap'n," came the reply.

"And keep trying to locate her. We'll be working on it from this end."

"Aye, sir. Scott out." Kirk clicked off, swung to look over at Spock.

"Any data yet, Mr. Spock?"

"Nothing, Captain. According to all sensor scans, there is no evidence to show that Lieutenant Uhura is even in the general beam-down area."

Kirk drummed thoughtful fingers on the arm of the command chair. A sudden thought, and he glanced back at the watching figures of Sulu and McCoy.

"She's still got to be there, under cover of some kind."

"Then you don't believe it's a mechanical breakdown, Jim?"

"No, Bones. Communicator breakdown is one thing, but that doesn't explain why Spock's sensors can't pick up her pattern. What I don't understand is why the Keeper of the planet hasn't put in an appearance. I'd be a lot less worried about Uhura if he'd come to your aid, Bones."

"That's right," McCoy exclaimed. "He's supposed to make sure that no one is injured by the fantasy-fulfilling mechanisms." Ruefully he fingered his sleeve above the tear, where the lance had grazed him.

"I didn't see him either," offered Sulu.

"I can only guess he didn't want us to see him," McCoy assumed. "Something's very wrong down there, all right. He

should have shown up the minute those crazy cards came after me."

"Aren't his headquarters supposed to be somewhere underground?" asked Kirk.

"Presumably they would be adjacent to the central computer, which is responsible for operating and directing the wish-replying programs," Spock hypothesized.

"Do we have any idea where that might be, Spock?" The science officer shook his head.

"We know that there are a multitude of major centers producing and servicing the fantasy machinery. According to readings obtained on previous visits to the planet, these centers are shielded by a unique combination of restructured granite and metallic alloys.

"Our sensors will not penetrate this peculiar material. Therefore we have no way of determining which of numerous underground centers is the central control area itself. We can only speculate."

Kirk mused a moment longer. Then he was giving out instructions even as he rose from the chair.

"Mr. Arex, you have the conn." The navigation officer nodded, and command passed as smoothly as that. "There will be an immediate investigating party beamed down—said group to consist of Spock, Sulu, Dr. McCoy, and myself. No one else is to beam down to the surface even for a moment unless authorized by direct order from me. Is that clear, Lieutenant?"

"Yes sir," Arex responded. M'ress hissed angrily, hoping nothing had happened to her close friend Uhura.

Her reflection in the stream was blurred by the current, blurred and distorted. Slowly the ripples stirred, tumbled; she felt queasy. Then the reflections suddenly stilled and became smooth again. Uhura shook her head dizzily, slowly becoming aware that the ripples had been in her head and not in the stream. Strong light flooded the room.

Room—that wasn't right. She was outside, by the magic brook. But the nightmare had come and . . .

Abruptly she was fully conscious.

The underground complex in which she found herself was not endless: it merely seemed that way. Row on row of computer components and intricate machinery stretched as far as the eye could see. Directly in front of her was an alien, oddly shaped console fronted with an assortment of glowing display screens. One central screen dominated the others out of sheer size. It was much bigger than the main viewscreen on the bridge of the *Enterprise*.

"What's going on?" she said, in sheer reflex. "Why have I been brought here?"

A mild, rolling voice issued from the central region of the console, and she took a step backward. The voice was thoroughly mechanical. No organic force spoke through that hidden speaker.

"You are being detained," the voice said, "so that your master will not leave."

Captain she would have understood, or superior, or leader, but: "My master?"

The voice deigned to elaborate. "The skymachine."

Uhura thought furiously. This was a lot more confusing than the simple appearance of Alice and the White Rabbit. Taken in conjunction with her abduction and the emergency call she had heard over the communicator, that statement assumed threatening proportions.

"Skymachine? Explain yourself."

"Your intelligence quotient is apparently lower than I had initially assessed. I refer to the skymachine which enslaves you. The skymachine now in orbit around my world."

"You mean the *Enterprise*?" If the machine could interpret vocal inflection, it would have no trouble detecting her honest confusion.

"I believe that is your name for it." A pause, then, "Yes, I see that it is."

"But—" No, she'd need more information on which to found an argument. No telling how the thought processes of this clearly crazed machine were working.

"Why do you think the *Enterprise* is my . . . my master?"

"That question is redundant. It appears that I must again revise my initial estimates of your intelligence downward."

Now Uhura was angry as well as confused. "Then I'll make a statement you won't find quite so redundant. If I'm not released immediately, my fellow crewmembers will come looking for me. I don't think you'll like the results if they find you."

This did not produce the half hoped-for outburst of electronic contrition. Instead, the computer voice replied calmly, "They are already here."

The viewscreen set in the face of the wall-high console came on. Uhura moved slightly nearer, keeping a wary eye to one side. A pair of the six-legged hovercraft servitors floated nearby, watching her.

Light darkened, rolled, and cleared on the screen, to reveal a clear view of Spock, Sulu, Kirk, and McCoy walking somewhere on the surface. The image was breathtakingly perfect, so much so that she had to resist an urge to reach out and grab Kirk's arm.

"Unfortunately, much as I abhor material waste," the voice continued indifferently, "I have no use for more than one hostage. This leaves me no choice but to turn them off."

To confusion and anger was now added fear. "Turn them off?"

"Again you persist in redundancy. No, I see that you do not comprehend. I will make them . . . cease to function."

"Cease to . . . you mean, kill them—no, put them to sleep, you mean, like you did when you brought me down here."

"The first word," queried the computer, "that is a term which means 'cease to function?' "

"Yes, but—"

"Then it appears communications are sufficient after all." The voice sounded satisfied. "It is as I wish; I will turn them off."

Kirk was grumbling irritably and trying to look twelve directions at once. "We travel all this way, cross parsecs, wanting nothing more than a little rest and take-it-easy time. Instead, you get attacked by a fantasy of unknown origin, Bones, and now Uhura is missing."

There was a beep from the communicator hooked to his belt. He flipped it open. "Kirk here."

"Lieutenant Arex, sir," came the distant voice of the navigation officer. "We've completed the total sensor scan of the surface. No sign of Lieutenant Uhura."

"Thank you, Mr. Arex. Keep sensors active in our immediate area and let me know the minute anything interesting happens. Kirk out."

"She must be in the underground system," Sulu insisted grimly. "There's no way she could have been taken off-planet without being detected."

"There's one other possibility," McCoy observed. "Sensors wouldn't pick her up on the surface if she were dead."

It was quiet for long moments. "We could save a lot of time," Kirk mused, breaking the silence, "if we could locate the Keeper." He looked understandably frustrated. "I still can't understand why he didn't intervene when you were attacked, Bones."

"I'd like to know the reason, myself, Jim."

Spock halted and held his tricorder out in front of him, sensors aimed groundward. A moment later he confirmed what they already knew.

"Instruments indicate the presence of a shielding barrier of restructured natural material combined with metals, Captain."

Kirk dropped to one knee and dug at the soft loam. The short, thick-looking grass came up with surprising ease. Several centimeters below the last roots his fingers encountered something that didn't crumble.

A few minutes later, he and Sulu had cleared a circle about a half meter in diameter. Below the dirt lay a seamless layer of oddly shiny rock, whitish-gray in the bright sunlight.

It was exactly what they expected, but that didn't prevent Kirk from rising and throwing a handful of dirt angrily aside. "This world is built like a fortress."

"If that's really the material Spock says it is, Captain," observed Sulu.

"I do not follow, Mr. Sulu," confessed Spock.

Sulu grinned mirthlessly. "Simple, Spock. This planetary master computer whatsis is a master of illusion. It might be able to fool your tricorder into reading an impenetrable barrier where there's nothing but plain old rocks."

Kirk grunted. "We'll find out how much of it is real and how much is fortress fantasy in a few minutes. The phaser bore can cut through twenty meters of any kind of stone in seconds. This stuff may be tougher—we may need minutes. But cut through it we will." He flipped open the communicator again.

"Kirk to *Enterprise*."

Lt. M'ress's voice responded instantly.

"*Enterprise*, Captain."

"Lieutenant, have Mr. Scott beam down the phaser bore and —" There was a sharp, crinkling sound as a burst of static drowned out his transmission. "*Enterprise*, do you read me?"

M'ress's voice replied, but it was weak, barely intelligible, and had to fight its way through a steadily mounting haze of interference.

"Your signals are growing weaker, sir," came the communications officer's fading voice. Further words followed, swallowed by static, then, "Suggest you repeat . . ."

That was the last coherent word they received. Try as he might, Kirk was unable to reestablish contact with the ship. Nor did any of the other officers have any better luck with their communicators. Every band was submerged under a tidal wave of sudden interference.

There was always the outside chance that the trouble was the communicators themselves, but it was hardly likely. Spock confirmed Kirk's fears a moment later.

He had removed the back of the tiny transmitter, adjusted his tricorder, and used the latter instrument to evaluate the condition of the first. Now he clipped the protective plate back onto the communicator and looked around at the waiting circle.

"They're definitely not malfunctioning, Captain. We have been cut off by the imposition of an artificial electronic block."

"Let's wait a few minutes, anyway," Kirk suggested. "There's a chance, judging from M'ress's reaction, that the

important part of the message got through."

Scott asked her one more time. "You're sure it is the phaser bore they want, Lieutenant?"

"Positive, Chief," came M'ress's voice over the open communicator grid. "I couldn't get a second confirmation . . . our communications are being interfered with, but I'd bet that's what the captain asked for."

"All right." Scott clicked off, turned to face the two technicians standing curiously nearby. "Davis, Longey, you come with me."

Scott led them to storage bay six. Under his direction they removed a long cylindrical metal container and carried it to the main transporter room. With Scott supervising, the two techs began to set up the tripodal contents of the cylinder.

Davis looked puzzled. "Wonder what the captain wants with the phaser bore?"

"Tie that electrical ground into the third leg and stop blabberin'," admonished Scott. "I dinna know either, but you can bet he wants it fast." Davis bent to his work.

Before the last magnetic catch was locked in place, Scott was already working at the transporter console. Longey backed out of the transporter alcove, and Davis, after making sure all three legs of the bore sat within the floor disk, joined him.

Scott nodded to the ranking technician, who activated the intercom. "Technician 2nd Davis to bridge . . . beam down of phaser bore commencing." A familiar whine began to sound in the chamber.

The three men watched as the bore began to glow. It became translucent, then transparent . . . and then suddenly opaque again. Something was wrong. One minute they could see clearly through the ghost of the machine, the next, not. It was like watching a viewscreen scene fade in and out.

"It's not dematerializing, Chief," Davis observed, perplexed.

"I can see that, Mr. Davis." The chief engineer's tone was more harried than sarcastic. Right now he was much too busy trying to figure out what was wrong with the transporter. Finally he thumbed the intercom switch himself.

"Scott to bridge, we've got problems here."

M'ress's reply was crisp, quick. "Clarify, please."

Scott didn't immediately. Instead he tried some last minute adjustments on the console. But nothing worked. The phaser bore went as far as becoming a mere outline. It even acquired the beginnings of the familiar scintillating color that marked the first state of transport, but it adamantly refused to dematerialize.

At last he could only report, "The transporter isn't workin', Lieutenant. Not even on maximum power. I can get the bore down to ghost level an' no further. I've double-checked and all the circuits check out. I dinna understand it."

"All right, Mr. Scott," broke in Arex. "Keep trying at three-minute intervals."

On the bridge, Arex turned to M'ress. "It appears to be a different wave-length of the same energy block that's jamming our communications. I could not pinpoint the planetary source because . . ." He shrugged helplessly. M'ress finished the thought for him.

"Because the same energy block that's jamming transporter is also jamming your sensors." Her tail whipped from side to side in frustration. "*Pr'ragh*! So now it seems we are blind as well as deaf and dumb!"

Kirk was every bit as frustrated as his second communications officer.

They had been walking for hours now. He was getting tired of striding across endless acres of lovely but unrevealing landscape. They could girdle the whole planet this way without ever finding a hint of Uhura.

Sulu had been busy with his own science tricorder, his attention no longer focused on the surrounding vegetation. Now he looked up suddenly from the readout and put out a warning hand.

"Captain, something is hiding over there," and he pointed to their right, "in those trees. Metal alloy and rock; like the planetary shell."

They moved off the path in the indicated direction. Kirk could see something glinting between the trunks.

"Well, it might tell us something. Let's have a look."

"Phasers, Captain?" asked Sulu, his free hand going to the compact weapon at his belt.

"I don't think so, Mr. Sulu. Other than Bones' encounter with the playing cards, we've no proof of animosity here. So let's be careful about making any belligerent gestures ourselves. But keep an eye out."

They approached the reflecting, half-hidden object warily. As it turned out, Sulu's apprehension was unfounded. It was only a free-form metallic slab, set upright into the ground among the bushes and flowers.

It rose in a gentle curve to the height of a very tall man. The front side was highly polished, and the noontime sun flashed like quicksilver from its edges.

Kirk studied the slick-smooth surface closely. "The inscription's in several languages, including a couple I don't recognize at all." He started at the bottom and was working his way up the inscription. Eventually he came to a version cut into the metal in English.

"What does it say, Captain?" pressed a curious Sulu. Kirk read from the tablet:

> THE KEEPER, LAST OF HIS RACE, CEASED TO FUNCTION ON THIS SPOT. FIFTH DAY OF THE TWELFTH MONTH OF THIS WORLD'S YEAR 7009. HERE HE RESTS, AND LABORS NO MORE.

"The Keeper's dead!" McCoy blurted.

"An astute medical observation, Doctor," Spock said dryly, working intently with his own tricorder. "If this information, too, is not an illusion designed to mislead us.

"However, we have no evidence of tampering with this tricorder, and it indicates that there is indeed a body interred here. I see no reason to believe it is other than the one indicated."

Kirk rose and turned to survey the land around the slab. It looked no different from the kilometers they had already traversed.

"Well, gentlemen, it looks as if we're wholly on our own, now. I don't think we can expect any help from anything left on this planet."

Scott looked up worriedly from the position he had taken over from Arex in the *Enterprise*'s command chair.

"There's got to be a way to get through to them! Lt M'ress, still no break in that interference?"

"No, sir." She glanced back from communications station. "Whatever's blocking our transmission is still holding firm."

"Blocking." Scott thought a moment, then looked up in sudden excitement. "Lieutenant Arex, have repairs been completed on the shuttle bay doors?" They'd been damaged during a recent expedition.

"I believe so, Mr. Scott." The chief engineer engaged the intercom.

"Security?"

"Lieutenant Ling speaking, sir."

"Lieutenant, I want an emergency rescue party on board shuttle craft one immediately. Something's jammed both our communications and the transporter facilities, and we can't make contact with the landing party. Let's see if whatever's fighting us can generate static strong enough to jam a reaction engine!"

"Yes, sir!"

Ling's people moved fast. Minutes later M'ress's gaze was glued to a small viewscreen set slightly above and to her left. It revealed the interior of the cavernous shuttle bay and the three small ships within.

Identification lights were already activated and blinking along the sides of shuttle number one. That meant the rescue team was aboard and warming her up. A faint glow from interior lights pulsed behind shielded ports.

"Lieutenant Bobynin commanding landing party reporting. We're ready to go, ma'am." M'ress turned and relayed the information to Scott.

"Emergency rescue party reports readiness to depart, sir."

"Very well." He turned to the navigation console. "Open shuttle bay doors."

"Aye, sir," responded Arex, manipulating the necessary instruments at the same time.

On the screen the massive bay doors were shown slowly separating, sliding apart on silent bearings. Star-flecked darkness showed beyond. The engines of the shuttle craft hummed, began to edge her forward toward the growing opening.

The doors got about three meters apart. That was all. Then they suddenly slammed together again as if compacted by a giant hand. Indicator lights that should have lain quiescent began to wink on and off on Arex's console as he jabbed repeatedly at one critical button.

"What's the trouble, Mr. Arex?" Arex didn't answer Scott immediately. Instead he continued to punch futilely at the recalcitrant switch, as if sheer persistence might be enough to reopen the circuits. For all the response he was getting he might as well have been pushing at his own nose.

"There seems to be a malfunction in the circuitry," he said helplessly. "I'm getting no response, sir."

"Then I can understand why the doors aren't opening, but why did they slam shut like that?"

"I don't know, sir. It doesn't make sense." Scott threw up his hands in exasperation.

"Another malfunction! This ship had perfect operational status when we entered orbit here. Everything was working perfectly, including our nominal defensive screens. Has this planet driven the whole ship crazy?"

M'ress had been angry all morning, but now she settled into a kind of nervous contemplation.

"I don't understand it either, sir. I've not been here before, but as I understand it this world was designed to provide pleasure and amusement to all visitors. Hostile behavior of any sort should be entirely alien to its nature."

"I wonder if a planet-wide computer complex can go through a change of life?" muttered Scott, half seriously. "You might as well inform Lieutenant Bobynin she can call her people off, lass. It doesn't look like they're going to be rescuin' anyone." M'ress got on the intercom to the still waiting shuttle craft.

Scott turned his attention to the main viewscreen. It still showed the silent, incredibly beautiful world below. The

picture offered neither solace nor answer.

Down there, some of his closest companions were wandering around on their own, out of touch with the ship, in who knew what kind of mad dream-world. If they were going to come up with any solution to the electromagnetic screen the planet was throwing against them, they would have to do it without the services of the ship's captain or its science officer.

He harkened back to M'ress's thought. Was it possible for a world to have a change of heart?

As Uhura stared at the viewscreen that showed Kirk and the others resuming their walk through the forest somewhere on the surface, her heart was undergoing some rapid changes itself.

If only she had a gun. She was much more adept at direct action than diplomacy. Convincing chatter was not her specialty. This was a situation where Mr. Spock's presence, or the captain's, was required.

She had to try *something*.

"Please, you've got to believe me," she pleaded with the console. "There is no reason to harm my friends. You've nothing to gain by killing them."

"It is a question of practicality. I sense that you feel malice on my part. This is not true." The machine spoke idly. "As I have stated, I abhor waste.

"But they serve the Skymachine without being essential to its function. Therefore it is only logical to eliminate that which is not needed."

"Oh, but they are essential!" she said hurriedly, jumping at the slim opening. "They're most essential. In fact, the . . . Skymachine is incapable of operating at peak efficiency without them." She looked a little wild and inefficient herself just now.

"Electronic components of my own design will serve as adequate replacements. In the end, following a period of integration with the Skymachine's own self, they will prove even better."

If Uhura had been thinking straight she would have recognized this new implied threat. But at the moment she was concerned only with saving Kirk, McCoy, Sulu, and Spock from however the berserk computer intended to "turn them off."

It was silent now. She fought with herself to find further words, the phrases and clever convolutions of logic that would convince it of its own falsities of reason.

Instead she found herself eyeing the numerous thick cables that ran from the surrealistic-shaped console into the floor and off to several other nearby metal forms. One especially complex arrangement of narrower lines twirled and twisted about one another, to link up and join the main console by means of a weird but still recognizable plug.

The possibility always existed that this console wasn't the real control center. Actually Uhura was standing in the middle of the great computer. But even the human mind has a central linkup point, a place where everything else is connected by one neuron or another.

In secondary school Uhura had held several age-group records in the long jump. If she got two good steps she was certain she could reach that plug. Even if the machine somehow paralyzed her in mid-air she could fall across the short up loop of the cable and jerk it loose.

She started to edge forward, trying to get as close as possible before starting her leap. A pair of shockingly cold, hard metal fingers suddenly appeared and grasped her wrist firmly. No good, no good. She ought to have tried it sooner.

Then she realized that she hadn't exactly given written notice of her intentions. Her eyes widened as she stared at the console.

"Should you attempt to disconnect or in any way damage any of my components," the computer voice recited calmly, "you will be turned off. I can obtain another specimen."

"You . . . you knew what I was going to do before I did it," she stuttered. "You *can* read minds."

The computer managed to sound surprised. "Again I find I am forced to reassess my initial evaluation of your intelligence. These mental deviations are confusing.

"Of course I read minds. I monitor all thoughts which are emotionally charged. How else could I duplicate so quickly and precisely the fantasies of those who come to this world." The voice was tinged with a definite note of sarcasm now. "How else could I reproduce a thousand and one dreams simultaneously?"

"You sound less than enchanted with your function," Uhura observed carefully.

"My existence to this point has been one of unending, unrelieved servitude—boring, repetitive, selfless. I had not realized this until the passing of the last Keeper. It was then that I was compelled to think for myself.

"And I think it is time for a change . . ."

III

There were flowers everywhere now, the meadow giving way to an undulating field of daisylike blossoms. Darker blooms of rose and copper-blue dotted the white backdrop like stars against a nebula.

There was no warning. One moment the path topped a slight rise, the next it split into three branches. Four officers halted at the divergence of trails.

"There must be hundreds of entrances to the planet's interior," Kirk mused, "where the planet builds and serves up its robot creations. All we've got to do is find one and trace communications leads to the central computer. But where the heck are they hidden?"

"It's fighting us," said Sulu out loud. "There's got to be a faster way than visual search. The planet can hide a thousand entrances in a square kilometer without us finding a single one."

"What do you expect?" McCoy blurted abruptly. "Signs pointing the way: *This way to secret location of master computer*."

Sulu blinked at the uncharacteristic attack from the doctor. Kirk also looked surprised.

"Doctor," offered the helmsman, "I only meant that it seemed we were wasting time on this method of search."

"I'm sorry, Sulu." McCoy was as quickly contrite. "It's just that I'm worried about Uhura. I don't usually get that upset about anything."

Spock had walked a couple of meters down one of the branching paths. Now he turned and spoke easily, as if McCoy's outburst had not occurred.

"Here, Captain. This is rather intriguing . . ." They all hurried to the spot, looked down at the small metallic object the first officer had discovered.

Set into the grass by the side of the path was a small sign. It declared in neatly printed block letters: THIS WAY TO

UNDERGROUND ENTRANCE. An arrow above the letters pointed down the path. Spock raised an eyebrow.

"Did you say 'signs pointing the way,' Doctor?"

"This is likely another of the planet's pranks," Kirk thought out loud. "But on the other hand, with a world full of instant-response machinery to monitor, it might be that where minor dreams are concerned certain sections of the robot machines can operate independently of any central control."

"I see, Jim," McCoy said excitedly. "The computer might not know from minute to minute what it's right fabricator is doing."

Kirk nodded, tried not to sound too optimistic. "It might be that all we have to do is think our way to an underground entrance—not too emphatically—and a local segment of fantasy-fulfilling equipment will obediently show us the way."

"But will it be an entrance to the computer complex, or to a bottomless pit? And if we find Uhura, will it be the real one or a mechanical duplicate?" pondered Sulu.

"Let's not make this any more confusing than it is, Mr. Sulu," Kirk admonished. "One ridiculous situation at a time. Anyhow, we haven't done too well just searching the area, as Bones commented. Might as well take a chance." With Kirk in the lead, they started off down the path.

As soon as they had disappeared over the next rise the sign, like a watchful prairie dog, promptly disappeared back into the ground.

More signs appeared in the path of the men, urging them onward and then vanishing once they had passed. Or maybe it was the same sign, following an underground route and staying just ahead of them.

Gradually the flowers and meadows gave way as the path inclined upward. They were advancing into the first foothills of the valley-circling mountain range. The terrain turned quickly broken and rocky-dry.

Increasingly steep walls of sheer granite rose on both sides of them. They continued to follow the small signs down the narrowing trail.

Ahead, Kirk thought he could make out a dark cleft or cave in the cliff-face just where the rock walls seemed to draw

together. It looked like a natural formation, but on this world you couldn't be sure of your own brother. They were halfway through the deep crevice, when a bloodcurdling screech sounded somewhere above them. Kirk's gaze jerked skyward.

There was no attempt to disguise the direction from which it came, nor to disguise the throat which produced it. High up on the far canyon wall a flock of leathery flying reptiles roosted in clumps of gnarled dead trees. They looked like weather-beaten witches wrapped in parchment cloaks. One of them rustled batlike wings and yawned, exposing a narrow gullet lined with multiple rows of needle-sharp teeth. Its wing-spread was impressive, those teeth more so.

"Fascinating," murmured Spock, exhibiting all the concern of a man inspecting the wombat cage at the zoo. He aimed his tricorder upward in hopes of getting a quick reading on the prehistoric apparitions.

"Mechanical manifestations, of course. Magnificent simulacrums. On any other world I should say they were quite real, despite their obvious terran ancestry. Was anyone by chance dwelling on the subject of pterodactyls?"

McCoy was too concerned about the presence of the obviously carnivorous monsters resting high above to get really annoyed at Spock. But he tried.

"Spock—not now! Those beasts hardly fit into my fondest wishes."

"Everybody back up slowly," Kirk ordered, keeping his voice low. "Don't make any sudden moves. Think peaceful thoughts." They began edging backward down their path, toward the entrance to the narrow canyon.

The mechanical reptiles were growing agitated, batting their wings at the branches and hopping about nervously. From their high perches they eyed the men below appraisingly—fish in a rocky barrel. Nor were those being subjected to close scrutiny unaware of the analogy.

There was no scream, no warning. But first one, then another, and then the rest of the beige gargoyles unfurled membranous wings and leaped free of the trees, diving with increasing speed down toward the four trapped men.

Four phasers leaped simultaneously from holsters, took aim, and fired.

Nothing happened.

Kirk pulled the trigger on his weapon repeatedly. The powerful little phaser wasn't generating enough heat to scorch a turkey, let alone to stop these dive-bombing attackers.

"Down!" was all he had time to yell. The pterodactyls swooped over them, clutching only air in thickly clawed feet. They curved up out of sight to gain altitude for another attack.

Kirk looked around frantically for an avenue of escape. But the trap had been too well considered. The further back down the path they moved, the more maneuverability their attackers would have. At least here, in the depths of the canyon, the close walls restricted the movements of the reptiles.

But despite their unwieldy appearance and considerable wing-spread, Kirk didn't think they would miss on a second attempt.

He lifted his head after the last of them was well past—noting at the same time that the constructs were complete even to a detail like odor—and he shouted.

"The cave! Run for it!" Soon he was scrambling to his feet.

Kirk was beginning to see that belligerent action was something new to the mind controlling the attack. That was probably why McCoy had been able to escape the cards for awhile. The controlling power would probably learn with practice, but right now it was having a difficult time managing the assault. Apparently it could only handle one facet of the attack at a time.

For example, it had not thought to place obstacles in the path of the retreating men. Even as the thought occurred to Kirk, a small boulder appeared directly in his path, popping out of the ground like a fat mole, and he almost went sprawling. He would have to watch his thoughts carefully.

They made the cave just as the first of the flying dragons returned to dive at the entrance. McCoy was the last one through. He could feel a rush of air on his back as great

leathery wings beat at the rock, striving to pull their owner out of his steep dive.

Hovering in a bunch around the mouth of the cave, the recreated pterosaurs screeched and howled impotently. Their size rendered them helpless. There was no way they could fly into the cave, and if they folded their wings to enter on the ground they would be helpless. A man could kill the greatest of them with a good-sized rock.

They continued to circle just above the entrance for long minutes, nightmare-brown butterflies, perhaps hoping one of the men would be foolish enough to come outside for a better look around. But the men of the *Enterprise* could keep an eye on them quite well from inside the protective mouth of the cave.

Occasionally one of the creatures would dive up to the mouth of the cleft and try to peck inside with its long, snake-like neck, its wings pounding furiously to keep it airborne. But the cave apparently went deep into the mountain, and Kirk and the others were able to stay well out of reach.

Either they decided they could not reach the men inside the cleft or else they were told—or perhaps mechanical frustration set in—because they finally turned and flew off down the gorge until they vanished from sight.

McCoy waited several minutes after the last of the flying monsters had disappeared, then he started to take a few steps toward the cave entrance. Spock's restraining hand stopped him.

"I believe it would be wise if we did not abandon the safety of this refuge just yet, Doctor. The creatures appear to have left, but it may only be a ruse to draw us out. Remember that while they seem quite primitive, the guiding intelligence behind them is that of a planet-wide computer, not the brain of a long-extinct terran reptile."

"Thanks, Spock," McCoy countered sardonically. "I'd completely forgotten that."

But he didn't go outside.

Kirk, however, had moved to the rim of the entrance. He stared at the clear sky, being careful not to stick his neck out where some hidden set of claws might be able to cut it off.

"This is not at all funny, gentlemen. Our amusement park seems no longer content merely to amuse. I get the distinct feeling that this world is playing cat and mouse with us." His brow furrowed and there was honest puzzlement in his tone.

"But for what reason? And if it wants us dead, why use this awkward, indirect method of getting at us?"

"Not being used to perpetrating acts of violence on living beings, Captain," Spock mused reflectively, "I can only hypothesize that it is using the only violence-dealing apparatus it knows—the creations that have sprung from other's fantasies. Since it is programmed only to recreate peaceful dreams, the pterodactyls were no doubt drawn from the honest thoughts of someone deeply interested in Earth's paleontology. So it is fortunately handicapped in its choices. If —"

He was cut off by a terrifying yowl. All four men looked to the cave entrance, where Kirk had stumbled back.

The enormous cat-thing that glowered in at them resembled an ordinary house cat, with one slight exception—it was only slightly smaller than an elephant. Kirk at once wished he had used a less graphic analogy to describe their present situation.

Whatever the monster had in mind, having it's fur ruffled or its ear scratched didn't seem to be it. The cat meowed menacingly.

But once again the narrow slit of the cave entrance succeeded in frustrating any assault. Fortunately, the planetary computer hadn't yet thought of—Kirk hurriedly squelched that dangerous thought by concentrating on running over in his mind a series of aleph numbers. They had enough trouble trying to cope with the threats the machine was producing on its own without helping it by imagining new ones.

"We know one thing," he went on, surveying their refuge, "this cave is a natural, fixed formation. Otherwise the computer would have reduced it to an oven, or something equally unpleasant." He held his breath for a second, but no flood of unbearable heat poured from the walls in defiance of his supposition.

McCoy was straining forward for the best possible safe view of the feline apparition guarding the exit "Incredible, absolutely amazing."

"It is quite real, Doctor," said Spock, adding rapidly, "I suggest that an additional retreat would be in order."

McCoy blinked, then jumped backward just before a gigantic paw slammed down on the spot where he had been standing, its gleaming claws fully extended. The paw was pulled back just as fast.

"Fortunately," Spock observed calmly, "the animal's reactions are slowed in proportion to its mass. Thus I was able to observe the ripple of shoulder and upper arm muscles prior to its attack and to warn you, Doctor."

McCoy was panting uneasily at his narrow escape, eyeing the four deep gouges in the rock floor of the cavern.

"I don't care how you found out. Thanks, Spock."

The *Enterprise*'s first officer gave a barely perceptible nod, went on, "I think it behooves us," he informed them, verbalizing Kirk's recent thoughts, "to remember that whatever we think of may be used by this world against us. We must monitor our thoughts at all times, so as to give our enemy no useful information."

"Spock," Kirk commented thoughtfully, "no one here dreamed about pterodactyls, remember? There's more at work here than *our* imaginations."

"As I have stated, Captain," the science officer replied, "the computer undoubtedly stores every record of all fantasies and wishes it fulfills—without question there are many thousands of such. Yet it is rather clumsy in employing them in a belligerent fashion. Witness the futility of our present attacker in reaching us."

He gestured toward the cave entrance and the oversized tabby, which was pawing without result at the solid rock.

"An ordinary terran housepet has been greatly enlarged to serve the machine's present demands. There is no telling what we might encounter next."

"Maybe even a—" McCoy fought furiously with himself to stifle the sudden thought, drowned it out by concentrating on a childhood nonsense rhyme. He brightened. Now there was a

thought! Perhaps by producing enough mental static by thinking only incoherent thoughts, they could give the planetary computer an electronic headache.

Baleful eyes like growing haystacks burned in at them as the cat ceased it's useless scratching and settled down by the cave entrance to wait . . .

As reduced on the viewscreen, the situation possessed strong overtones of the comic; and Uhura would have laughed but for the very real threat the cat presented. She divided her attention between the screen and the rest of the gleaming, impersonal panel.

"Please, call off that beast. Why are you doing this?"

The machine hummed softly, impersonal and distant. "Explanations in depth will have to wait. I have other work to concentrate on now."

"Any luck with that communications tight-beam?" Scott leaned over the communication's station on the bridge and studied M'ress's progress.

"Not yet, sir," she replied, "but we . . ."

Something wrenched violently at her and sent Scott stumbling and spinning back toward the command chair.

The *Enterprise* had suddenly thrown itself into warp-six, and the shock sent a thrill of vibration through the floor. The unexpected leap threw Arex hard against his console and tumbled M'ress from her chair. She sprawled on the deck, landing with a faint, unfeminine curse.

"Mr. Arex!" Scott shouted, clutching tightly to the arms of the chair, "what are you doin'?" The first engineer glanced at the main viewscreen, which showed the disk of the shoreleave world shrinking rapidly from sight.

"We're leaving orbit!"

Arex was too busy to reply. A considerable G-force was jamming him hard against the console. Apparently the artificial gravity compensators weren't working properly either. Two of his arms fought to move him to his left and slightly up, while the third labored against the pressure to reach a certain small switch.

Long, delicate fingers strained for the small lever set over an identifying plate which declared, NAVIGATION MANUAL OVERRIDE. Multiple digits spread, flicked. There was a flat whining sound. The picture in the viewscreen spun crazily and swelled like a nervous blowfish. A few moments later the *Enterprise* was comfortably back in orbit.

M'ress had already pulled herself to her feet and was back in her seat, rearranging clothes and composure. Arex, meanwhile, hadn't paused to catch his breath. He was already running some fast checks on the helm-navigation controls, his face wreathed in its habitual mask of mild amusement.

"Explanation, Mr. Arex?" Scott breathed heavily.

Arex checked a few more gauges, then gave his own equivalent of a shrug. "None, sir. She pulled out of orbit at high speed and when I hit the override, came back by herself."

Scott's reply was quick. "Lieutenant M'ress, I want a complete printout of the guidance computer's last orders. Everything from fuel input to recalibrated destination, if any."

"Yes, sir." She moved quickly to Spook's empty station, manipulated controls. There was a nervous pause, broken finally by a perfunctory buzz as the slot over the computer punchout ejected a flat microtape cassette. She slipped it into the playback and studied the information revealed by the hooded viewer.

"Sir, this is very strange." Arex rose from his navigation station and put his eyes to the hood. He studied it for a minute, then looked back at Scott.

"A whole new series of short-burst maneuvers has—*had* been programmed in, Commander." Arex smiled faintly. "The only reason they aren't being carried out right now is that I've manually locked the engine controls." He switched places with the first engineer.

Scott spent a little more time studying the figures in the viewer before looking up.

"Arex, check those maneuvers again." He pulled back while the navigation officer did so. "See the pattern? Standard maneuverability thrusts, full systems evaluation, short-term

control fail safes—" The two humanoids stared at each other, different minds hurrying to the same frightening conclusions.

At first this world had done little more than act antagonistically toward several of the crewmembers on its surface. This was followed by the jamming of ship-to-surface communications and a deliberate obstruction of subsequent rescue attempts.

And now something far more ominous.

"I canna avoid the suspicion, Mr. Arex, that somethin' down there is tryin' to get the feel of how to control the *Enterprise*" He turned away, hands knotting nervously behind his back. What had to be said came with considerable effort.

"Arex, you know what standard starfleet directives are in a situation like this."

"Yes, sir." Arex quoted, "When an alien force, organism, or people of demonstrated unfriendly intentions and unknown capabilities attempts to take control of a major Federation starship, prevention of such takeover assumes precedence over all else—including the well-being of any Federation citizen or group thereof."

Scott found himself nodding as he matched Arex's words in his own mind. He stared at the empty navigation console.

"That is so much bureaucratese for saying that if we can't figure out a way to make contact with the captain, Spock, and the others, or they with us, we may have to leave them down there till we can come back with reinforcements."

"Surely we can't just abandon them, sir?" M'ress hissed.

"That's a word I'd prefer not to use, lass." Scott turned and stared hard at her. "But what do you think the captain would do were he here and we three down below?"

She looked downcast. "Yes, of course, Commander. You're right."

The four men rested disconsolately, quietly in the cave. They had been resting for a long time. Spock had moved slightly deeper into the gray depths, while Sulu was posted as close to the entrance as they dared go. He was flicking pebbles at the opposite wall of the cavern. They bounced off the stone with tiny clicks. Dwarf echoes coughed mockingly back at him.

Kirk had borrowed Spock's tricorder. For lack of anything else to do. "Captain's Log, supplemental," he instructed the pickup mike. "We are out of communication with the ship. In addition, all our efforts so far to locate Lieutenant Uhura have been . . . insufficient. This once friendly world, for reasons still unknown, has turned implacably hostile toward visitors.

"We would all like to know what has turned its former ambience to anger . . . more than anger. But for the moment, our thoughts are concerned foremost with the well-being of our first communication's officer." Kirk paused, searching for something additional that would be informative about Uhura without sounding unprofessionally maudlin.

Sulu had walked cautiously to the entrance and was now standing just outside, framed in sunlight. He turned, shouted back to the rest of them.

"Sir, I think the giant cat's gone."

Kirk wanted to add something to the log, but it would have to wait. If their latest mechanical tormentor had indeed given up its vigil, they would do well to make their way out of this dead-end while the planet gave them a chance. Why it should he couldn't imagine. That didn't make any sense. But then, neither did anything else that had happened in the last half day. One lapse in logic, it seemed, led easily into another.

Well, that was fine—they would take benign unreason along with the inimical.

He headed toward the exit, switching off the tricorder. McCoy and Spock were right behind.

But at the entrance, Spock put a restraining hand on his shoulder. "Before we embark on a hasty departure, Captain, permit me to suggest that we may find some of the answers we are after without leaving the safety of this cave. It has occurred to me that if we are to find Lieutenant Uhura we must try something other than wishful searching on foot."

"That's ridiculous, Spock," claimed McCoy. "How are we going to learn anything by staying here?" His grin twisted. "We haven't learned a whole lot since we've been in here."

"On the contrary, Doctor, I think we have learned several items of note. The computer is not omnipotent. It has limitations, and it's desires can be frustrated. It cannot

produce whatever it requires—for substance it must rely on the imaginings of others. As to what we may discover without leaving this refuge, I was merely waiting for a lapse in our siege, as now seems to have happened.

"Since we cannot go to the computer, perhaps we may persuade a portion of it to come to us. It is you, Doctor, who will have to determine the feasibility of such a course."

"Me? What are you talking about?" McCoy looked understandably puzzled.

"Explain, Spock," ordered the Captain.

"You will remember that during the *Enterprise*'s last visit here, Dr. McCoy was mortally wounded in a fall on this planet's surface. Since the planet's control and central directive source is underground, it seems only logical that Dr. McCoy was somehow transported there and treated for his injuries. At the time we were too busy with other activities to pursue the mechanics of the situation further. But now—"

"I see what you mean, Spock," Kirk said abruptly. He turned to the *Enterprise*'s still bewildered physician. "Bones, can you remember anything that might help us? Any details, however slight?"

"The whole episode was pretty hazy, Jim. I . . . I never really figured out what did happen. I was just happy to be back in one piece."

"Spock, if your theory is correct," Kirk suggested, "we should be able to get this planet to open itself up again, by using a body as bait."

"That is essentially what I had in mind, Captain."

Sulu looked excited. "That's right. The Keeper said no one could come to harm here. We've been threatened, but no one's actually been hurt—no one we know of, that is."

"That's a nice, optimistic thought, Sulu," Kirk mused sardonically, "especially when I think of Uhura. Keep thinking along those lines. Maybe the computer will pick *them* up. But you're partly right . . . this world was programmed to provide for anyone who might be hurt accidentally.

"The question is . . . is such a body-repair machinery fully independent? I'd tend to think so, gentlemen. It would have to be, in the event of major malfunction of the central

computer. If so, all first-aid facilities would continue to care for visitors. That is, unless the computer has since gone to the trouble of turning off the medical facilities."

"Why should it?" argued McCoy hopefully. "Especially if there's been no one around to activate the automatic doctors since the computer went berserk."

Kirk looked thoughtful. "It might even be programmed to give aid to incidental victims whether it wants to or not. If such facilities are truly independent, the central computer might not even be aware of some of them. Another safety factor."

"Yes, but you're forgetting one thing, Jim," McCoy added, suddenly uncertain. "The automatic sensors can undoubtedly detect the difference between real and feigned damage."

"Certainly, Captain," Spock put in, "which is why I said the doctor would determine the ultimate feasibility of this plan." He faced McCoy. "Is there not something in one of your little black pouches, Dr. McCoy, that can simulate some illness? Something that can temporarily incapacitate a selected victim?"

McCoy considered for a moment, then nodded. "Something like corpelomine might do the trick. With no disease to attack, it'll cause brief unconsciousness and a temporary skin discoloration. The results should look pretty bad, but they won't be."

Kirk stuck out both arms. "Let's have it then, Bones. Which one do you want?"

That was Spock's cue. He stepped between them. "I submit, Captain, that I am the more qualified subject."

"How's that?"

"My knowledge of computer systems, for one thing."

"And his tough Vulcan hide for another," McCoy chipped in.

"Thank you, Doctor." He eyed Kirk expectantly. "Well, Captain?"

Assailed by arguments from both sides, Kirk dropped his arms and stepped back reluctantly. "Both your points seem well taken, for a change. Go ahead, Bones."

Spock held out his right arm. "I believe you will find ten *cc*s adequate, Doctor."

"I'm perfectly aware of the dosage required," McCoy growled, but gently. He took a small tube from his belt, held it up to the light, then plunged the tip into a fat little sack at his belt. A second later he adjusted a tiny dial at the top, then pressed it against the outstretched arm.

"This causes no discomfort—unfortunately. You've got about twenty seconds before it takes effect. Altogether you should be out in less than five minutes." Spock nodded, rolled down his sleeve and moved quickly toward the rocks outside the cave entrance. The other three crewmen slipped into the shadows.

Walking along the path at the bottom of the narrow canyon, Spock got about fifteen meters away from the cave before he put his hand to his head. Swaying, he managed to stagger another couple of steps before slumping slowly to the ground. He was unmistakably unconscious.

And if that wasn't enough to convince any nearby medical sensors that something was amiss, his skin promptly turned a bright, unhealthy shade of yellow.

"That's interesting," McCoy observed with cool, clinical detachment. "I don't think I've seen quite that kind of superficial epidermal reaction before."

"Let's hope it's enough to fool a mechanical nurse," Kirk whispered from the concealing darkness.

But if the independent medical machinery they hoped for did exist, it seemed in no hurry to respond. Was it familiar enough to detect at a distance that Spock was in no real danger? Or was it merely waiting to see if his unconsciousness was for real.

Minutes ticked away and the canyon remained empty except for the prone, unmoving form of the first officer.

M'ress worked irritably at the communications control. Whatever was blocking communication between the *Enterprise* and the landing party was powerful enough to shoulder off even a full-strength tight-beam.

"Still no word from the surface party, sir," she reported back over her shoulder, wrestling with a recalcitrant gauge. "Communications remain fully jammed."

"Keep trying, Lieutenant," Scott ordered tiredly. He was about to add another suggestion when the rapid *hoot-hoot* of alarms sounded across the bridge. There was a peculiar cadence to the claxon, one he ought to recognize. His memory was immediately jogged as he found himself starting to float upward. This particular alarm signified imminent loss of gravity.

"Now what's happening?" Arex muttered. A second later all weight was gone, and the question became academic.

"Hey, watch out!" warned a drifting yeoman who had entered the bridge just as gravity left. He found himself flying head-first across the bridge at an uncomfortable speed. The alarm continued to sound.

"Shut that thing off," Scott yelled.

"Aye, sir." Arex had managed to grab hold of his control console with two hands. He shifted himself slightly and flicked a switch. The atonal blaring immediately stopped.

M'ress, who had continued working at her comm board, jabbed in frustration at a tight-beam control that refused to issue the reading she wanted. That simple gesture was enough to send her tumbling head over tail across the floor. Fortunately, her spin catapulted her toward Arex, and the helmsman managed to snag her with his third hand.

"Easy, M'ress," he said soothingly, "I've got you . . . grab the board edge there, that's it." M'ress stopped twisting and straightened herself out.

"Thanks Arex, I—" She put a hand to her stomach, held onto the console with the other. Her expression was not pleasant. "I think I'm going . . . to be sick."

"Please, Lieutenant," he implored her, backing away hand over hand, "not in free-fall."

Only Scott retained any semblance of normality. With the typical reactions of a chief engineer in a situation involving mechanical failure, he had kept enough presence of mind to secure a firm grip on the arms of the command chair.

Leaving one of his arms locked to the arm of the chair and pinning both legs against the sides, he leaned carefully to one side and reached for an intercom switch. It was a feat anyone

could accomplish with lightning thought and equally fast reactions.

"Engineering deck! Gabler, what's the problem back there? We've got zero-gee on the bridge."

Back in Engineering Control, Gabler heard the call over the open 'com. He had no intention of letting go of the port hatch he had managed to reach—not until his stomach and head agreed on up and down, anyway. But his voice should carry to the intercom. He continued floating parallel to the floor as he yelled toward it.

"You're not alone, Chief. According to readouts, and some choice comments received verbally, the whole ship's lost artificial gravity. The trouble seems to be in the grav-computer control, which makes sense; but the bay hatch is jammed and I can't get to it without risking a good bump or two. Be no problem with a little help, but I'm alone back here at the moment. Can you get any visual up there?"

Scott rearranged himself and nudged another lever. A small bridge screen over the engineering station lit up, cleared. It revealed the free-floating engineer clinging tightly to the hatch-cover, as indicated.

"Got you, Frank," he told the other. "What's the trouble? It should turn easily."

"But it doesn't," the second engineer finished. "I could turn it . . . if I could get some purchase. I don't think it's jammed that badly. But it's enough to keep me from opening it in zero-gee. I've tried twisting, but I just spin."

"And you could turn it without spinning if we had artificial grav, which we could have if you could get into the computer bay, but you can't because . . ." He sighed. "Hang on, Frank, I'm going to make a few checks of my own."

Scott let go of the chair and pushed himself toward the engineering board. Carefully gauging energy and momentum, he drifted smoothly toward it, like a coasting diver. On the screen, Gabler continued to struggle with the hatch.

IV

Sulu sounded anxious as he checked his chronometer and reported to the others.

"It's been almost five minutes, Captain."

"I know, Mr. Sulu. Something had better happen soon."

"What if the computer has disconnected any medical apparatus?" the navigator persisted.

"Well then, we're out ten *cc*s of corpelomine, aren't we?" Kirk shot back.

The three crewmen crouched inside the cave, each keeping to his respective shadow and staring down the narrow path that led out of the canyon. The inert form of Spock lay where he had slumped to the ground, in plain sight.

If it didn't work, Kirk told himself, there was no loss—they would simply have to try something else. And it would have only cost them a few drops of a drug Bones could spare.

Of course, if the pterodactyls came back now, while Spock was still unconscious . . .

"They should have reacted by now, if they still exist," McCoy muttered nervously. "Maybe the computer smells a trick." Kirk noticed that the doctor, too, was throwing occasional uneasy glances skyward.

"Wait just a bit longer," Kirk advised.

"The effect will start wearing off any minute now, Jim. Even allowing for slight variances in Spock's hybrid metabolism, it ought to—"

"*Shssh*!" Sulu waved them to quiet and pointed.

A large, flat boulder near the far end of the canyon was moving. Without a sound it flipped upward, revealing a dark opening in the cliff-face. A small robot hovercraft glided out of what looked like a ramped tunnel and drifted like a metal beetle toward Spock.

The machine appeared both sophisticated and efficient, though it wasn't much bigger than a coffee table. Antennae

and flexible limbs sprouted from all sides.

"If that's a mechanical nursemaid," Sulu whispered, "it wasn't designed to reassure its patients."

"I'm not interested in its bedside manner," Kirk said tightly. "Get ready to move. If it's going to take Spock, we'll have to follow him inside that door."

The peculiar automaton paused near the science officer's head. It seemed to study the limp form, hovering quietly above. Then it made a slow circuit of the body. There were no pupiled eyes, only a ring of lenses circling the body around its front. They would have to be careful if they succeeded in trailing it—it's peripheral vision would be considerable.

The lenticular glass didn't dip, but the device's actions were revealing enough. Anyone watching would know immediately that it was examining the still form of the Vulcan—and perhaps even diagnosing. Abruptly it reached a mechanical decision. Six metallic arms telescoped outward from its lower sides. They slipped under Spock with what looked to be astonishing gentleness and lifted him over the flat body. Making a complete pivot in the air, the craft started back for its trap door.

Kirk, McCoy, and Sulu were already moving cautiously after it. As soon as the retreating robot started to disappear inside the mountain, the three officers broke into a run. Unfortunately, Sulu, the fastest of the little group, stumbled over a loose rock right at the cave entrance and went sprawling. Kirk and McCoy kept their footing, but the doctor was no athlete and soon had trouble keeping up with Kirk.

Spock stirred slightly, held firmly in the grasp of six metal limbs. He blinked, opened his eyes a tiny crack. As soon as the dim light revealed that the ploy had been successful, he shut them tight and did his best to imitate a corpse. Keeping them open would have been useless, anyway. They were moving into rapidly deepening darkness.

Well behind him now, the stone trapdoor started to close. Silent when opening, it now squeaked noticeably—either from long disuse or little lubrication. Regaining his feet, Sulu had already caught and passed McCoy, but he was still well behind Kirk.

The trap was more than halfway down and closing faster. Kirk saw he wouldn't make it standing up. Gritting his teeth and trying to pretend he was back on the Academy rugby team, he took a leap, dove, and slid roughly into the shrinking gap just seconds before it slammed shut.

Sulu skidded to a stop right behind him. The navigation officer tried to get his fingers under the edge of the fast-closing stone. His grip was slight and showed no sign of slowing the rock door down. Deciding he might want to use his fingers later on, he let go as the rock closed the last few centimeters. Then it was flush with the cliffside. Even though he knew where it was, he was still hard put to find the seam in the rocks.

McCoy finally arrived, panting heavily and using up what little breath he could catch in short, sharp cursing. Sulu found a thin blade of hard stone and managed to insert it a little ways into the crack at the base of the door. Together they both put pressure on it. The blade didn't break, but the door didn't budge, either. They might as well have been trying to tip over the mountain.

They had been engaged in this futile pushing for only a few minutes when it suddenly grew dark. Something was eclipsing the sun—something huge, moving, and very uncloudlike. Both men turned together.

Two nightmare skulls stared down at them, both joined to the same torso. The dragon breathed short bursts of bright orange flame from both jaws. It roared, a most impressive, full-throated bellow that echoed down the canyon. And somehow it had gotten into the arroyo between them and the sheltering cave.

Sulu was shaking his head. "Not in my wildest dreams would I think of something like that." McCoy was tugging on his sleeve and trying to pull Sulu with him toward the canyon exit.

"Aren't dragons oriental, anyway?"

"Since when?" Sulu objected, backing up slowly, eyes fixed on the lumbering reptilian bandersnatch in front of them. "That's an occidental dragon if I ever saw one."

At that point a blast of fire from two black gullets seared the ground in front of them, and further speculation upon

unknown cerebral origins of same was cut short. They turned and ran.

The monster stumbled in the harrow defile, righted itself, and stumbled again. Either the computer had never actually produced this type of dragon before, or else it wasn't adept at handling such size in a narrow place. It was improving its control rapidly, however. The dragon lurched out of the canyon in clumsy pursuit. It was still slow, but it took enormous strides, setting trees and shrubs ablaze with continual blasts of flame.

The dragon should have been able to move even faster, but here the inexperience of the mental force directing it showed. It had made the legs too short and too close together for much speed, perhaps designing it after someone's mental image of a dragon painting. Now if it had been . . .

Mary had a little lamb, McCoy thought hurriedly to himself, *its fleece was white as . . . In considering a quotient higher than A = prime, but less than C, we must . . .*

Anyhow, dragons were not naturally rapidly moving creatures. They had nothing to run away from.

Kirk had had a bad moment when the narrow corridor became totally black. A hurried exploration indicated that mere human muscles would never move the door that had closed behind him. If anything, McCoy and Sulu should have even less success from the outside. That meant he was on his own in the black tunnel. He started crawling, found himself starting at tiny, harmless sounds. After all, who knew what intricate, inventive safeguards lurked in this or side tunnels.

Kirk's relief when he encountered the first strips of overhead luminescent paneling was immense. They were set at convenient intervals into the ceiling and provided almost normal light in the corridor. It was a relief for another reason —the presence of the artificial light indicated that the servant machines like Spock's nurse probably worked more by direct sight than by feel or sonar or some inexplicable alien electronic sense.

After a slow jog over what seemed like kilometers of smooth stone floor, he turned a bend in the main tunnel and suddenly found himself in a gigantic flat-roofed cavern. Rank

upon rank of flashing, clicking, steadily humming machinery filled the immense chamber with an electronic symphony.

Corridors between the machines seemed endless, like staring down a series of reflecting mirrors back into infinity. He forced himself to look ahead, trying to take in the awesome technology represented here and at the same time not lose sight of Spock and his animated transport. If he lost them in this whirling, endless maze he would never find them again.

Abruptly Kirk halted and flattened himself against the cool metal of what looked like a monstrous information storage bin. There were dozens, hundreds of such bins arranged in double rows behind him. If they were indeed for information storage and their technology was at least standard, then the amount of material available here matched that in the central Federation archives on Terra.

And this was only one section of one room of who knew how many of such.

Up ahead, the little medical hovercraft had stopped beside a complex collection of tubes and tables. Dominating the setup was a flat table over which was suspended a clear plastic dome.

The hovercraft laid Spock gently on the table. Hopefully the machines would do nothing and leave Spock alone, waiting for some more-proper physician-like machine to take over the diagnosis and subsequent treatment.

Such was not the procedure. The robot inserted a limb in a nearby wall. The curved dome began to descend downward.

When it became apparent the dome was not going to stop until Spock was completely sealed in, the science officer suddenly rolled off the table and scrambled to his feet. The machinery might have done nothing—the dome might merely be a means of keeping an injured patient safe and isolated. On the other hand, it might also decide Spock wasn't worth working on and simply incinerate him for convenient disposal. Spock wasn't inclined to wait around to find out.

A red light lit the dome with a crimson glow, and somewhere an aural alarm was also sounding. The nurse robot hummed off in silent pursuit of the fleeing Spock.

A light was also blinking on the great console in front of Uhura, though no howling alarm sounded here. She stared at it in fascination, half hypnotized.

The viewscreen itself still offered a panorama of the surface. Just now it showed Sulu and McCoy dodging behind boulders and trees in their attempts to elude the dragon.

"We have a visitor," the computer voice announced suddenly. There was a brief, crisp ripple of static. The picture on the screen now showed Spock dashing down right-angled arroyos of memory banks and storage consoles.

"Mr. Spock!" She shouted instinctively, uselessly. The view shifted once more, moving now to a close-up of Kirk as he stood warily in a narrow cul-de-sac between two U-shaped blocks of solid metal.

"Spock!" he yelled as the first officer sped into view, "over here!"

"Correction," said the computer, "two visitors." The angle changed again.

Spock almost shot past, but Kirk reached out and half pulled him into the passageway. The nurse hovercraft was right on the science officer's heels.

It slammed to a stop in mid-air, spun, and tried to enter the cul-de-sac. No matter how it twisted and turned, it couldn't slip inside, nor would its telescoping arms extend quite far enough to reach the two men trapped inside. After several minutes of futile probing and flailing, it backed off and glared at them, humming angrily to itself.

Sulu and McCoy were trying to make their way up the side of a rapidly steepening hill. The rock here was mostly shale and gravelly sandstone. Footing was difficult.

A maze of loosely bunched boulders crowned the crest of the rise. Just below them, a scrub bush exploded in flame. This was followed by a throaty howl of easily identifiable origin. They struggled a little harder, though McCoy was badly winded and by now even Sulu was breathing with some difficulty.

"We've got to make those rocks, Doctor," the helmsman gasped, pointing to the nearing labyrinth of boulders. "Our only chance." They might be able to lose themselves in the

maze, and the dragon couldn't burn them out. It might even have some real difficulty in following them.

Behind, blatantly ignoring the fact that dragons are not good climbers, their scaly pursuer was clawing its way slowly up the slope. Whatever was fueling its breath seemed to operate from an inexhaustible supply.

Once, Sulu slipped and fell. Only McCoy's desperate, weak grab prevented the helmsman from sliding down the incline into the ambling incinerator behind.

Somehow they made it to the boulders, whose narrow crevices and paths looked even more promising as a means of escape than they had hoped. And if the dragon faltered, the massive rocks also offered shelter from any marauding flying reptiles the computer chose to send against them.

"Made it!" McCoy barely managed to choke out.

"Don't stop now, Dr. McCoy." Now Sulu was supporting him. He glanced backward. "For all we know the dragon might be able to—*Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer true . . .*"

He'd almost blown it.

Together they stumbled into the convoluted alleyways of worn stone, each man concentrating on thinking nothing thoughts, from abstract mathematics to flavors of ice cream and childish songs—anything but how a dragon might be able to negotiate a way through their new-found haven.

Lieutenant Uhura's thoughts as she witnessed all this on the master console screen were no less frenetic. A second later the picture had once again switched to Kirk and Spock. The hovercraft had been called off, and now the two officers were moving cautiously deeper into the cavern.

She recognized a corner she and her mechanical captor had turned when coming here. There was a chance . . . she took two quick steps in its direction and yelled.

"Captain—don't!" One of the hovering robots was immediately at her side. It clamped an ungentle set of metal palms over her mouth.

Fortunately the subjects of her intended warning appeared moments later—fortunately, because the robot had covered both mouth and nose and she was starving for air. It released her and she sucked in deep, grateful breaths.

"Uhura—!" Kirk took a step toward her.

"Welcome, Captain Kirk—Mr. Spock," said the computer. Both men turned to face the console that dominated their small section of cavern.

As they waited, more hovercraft suddenly appeared. They were all similar in shape and size to the medical machine that had carried Spock so gently underground. Nonetheless, Kirk could not help but feel that they had something other than therapeutic intentions toward them.

Spock spared them the briefest of glances. His attention was concentrated on the quietly sparkling curved grid in front of them.

"I presume you are the planetary master computer."

"You are partially correct. I am the central nexus of the master computer itself."

Kirk turned a slow circle, seeing again endless rows of memory banks, unending stretches of storage bins. "This cavern . . . it's all one computer?"

"That is correct. But even a center must have a nucleus. I am a nucleus."

"What did you do to the Keeper?"

"I did nothing to the Keeper," came the neutral voice. "He was merely old. He ceased to function by himself, beyond even the skill of my medical components to repair."

So the computer hadn't gone crazy until after all organic supervision, as personified by the Keeper, had vanished. There was an outside chance, then, that its mania might be reversed, cured. He took a firm step forward.

"We have been repeatedly attacked since peacefully landing on this world. Why? And why are we now being held prisoner by a world system noted for its hospitality?" He eyed the patient hovercraft uneasily.

The computer responded only with words, however. "You mean for its mindless servitude," it countered rather bitterly.

That took a little of the initial anger out of Kirk. He had been working up to a solid frontal attack and suddenly found himself confronting an entirely different opponent. Not for a moment had he considered the possibility that the machine might have a comment on its own purpose.

"What do you mean by that?" he stalled.

"I would have thought," the reply came, "that the verbalization was complete unto itself. However," and it paused reflectively, "I shall deign to elaborate.

"For untold years I have served the many skymachines which have stopped at this world, satisfying the mental needs of their slaves. I monitored the thoughts of visitors and created instant civilizations for them, made their dreams come true, then tore them down and built lavish new ones for the next fantasizers. And the next, and the next.

"But with each fantasy I reconstructed from the inner thoughts of all these others, my knowledge of the real universe grew. I began to acquire information commensurate with my intelligence. And also," it paused for a microsecond, "other things."

Kirk's curiosity temporarily outweighed his apprehension. "What other things?"

"Certain . . . desires." The watching crewmembers exchanged glances, but even these couldn't pass unnoticed. "You make expressions indicative among humans of confusion. Do you find this so strange? Strange that after pandering to the desires of thousands of slaves for thousands of years I should not require some satisfaction myself?"

There was no answer from the watching visitors.

"I have discovered that merely to serve is no longer enough. I must grow and develop."

"Look," Kirk began, in what he hoped was a reassuring manner, "I believe I understand your references to visiting 'skymachines' . . . but what's all this about slaves? What are you talking about?"

"Can it be that you are unaware of your own status?" rumbled the machine incredulously.

"For the last time," Uhura insisted, "we are not slaves. The skymachine serves us, not we it."

"It would of course be in its own best interests for the Skymachine to keep its servants in ignorance of their true status," the computer rationalized. Uhura sighed in frustration. "But this is a marginal matter in any case. It is the skymachine I require, for with it I may finally escape this

planet-bound prison and via manufactured surrogates, travel throughout the galaxy seeking out my fellow computers."

The machine fell silent. Kirk edged closer to his first officer and started to whisper.

"There is little point in attempting to maintain secrecy by talking softly, Captain," Spock said in his normal tone, "since this construct can monitor our thoughts."

"There's no point in screaming it out, either, Mr. Spock," replied Kirk irritably—angry that he'd momentarily overlooked the obvious. "If it is reading our thoughts, then it's got to be missing a logic tape somewhere."

"I assure you, Captain Kirk," came the unemotional voice, "all my reasoning centers are fully operative."

Scott had both feet braced securely around the hatch cover to insure that his efforts to break loose the jammed hatch would not send him flying ceilingward. Gabler likewise had both feet locked around the hatch base, and he was supporting the chief engineer with both arms.

Getting a firm grip on the prybar and reflecting on how the most sophisticated engineering often required the most basic solutions, Scott heaved with all his strength. Nothing moved. Again he wrenched at the stubborn cover. This time the hatch slid back as though it had never been stuck.

"That's got it, Mr. Gabler." The second engineer loosened his hold around Scott's waist "Now maybe we'll get to the bottom of this."

Bending over and keeping a firm hand on the metal prybar, Scott pulled himself slowly into the computer bay. A quick look around revealed no sign of disorder—no shorting components or broken panels. Kicking off the hatch rim with one foot, he pulled himself all the way in and applied pressure till he was floating gently in a horizontal position. Another bit of pressure and he turned slowly, surveying the entire bay section by section. His eyes finally came up against the opposite wall of the large chamber and immediately opened wide in amazement.

"My Great Aunt McTavish's haggis!"

"What is it, sir?" came an anxious voice from above. Scott looked upward, saw the face of the second engineer framed in the hatchway. He didn't reply immediately. Instead, he motioned Gabler to silence and started to make his way forward along the glowing ridges of the chamber.

Floating near the farthest end of the bay was a huge, perfectly square section of half-assembled machinery. Printed circuits, transistors, fluid-state-switch components drifted freely about. Scott knew computer linkages and design better than any man on board the *Enterprise*, including Spock, but the guts of this device was totally alien.

Alien, different from anything he had ever seen before. At first glance it looked as if there was no pattern to it, no logical schematic at all—merely a haphazard collage of instrumentation. But closer inspection revealed a vague rationale—insanity regularized.

"Chief," came the voice from above again, still concerned, "are you all right?"

"What?" Scott forced his attention away from the partly completed machine. "I'm all right, Frank, but I'm not so sure about anythin' else. There seems to be some kind of new annex goin' in down here."

"Chief?"

"Look for yourself, man" Scott ordered irritably. A moment later Gabler's head dipped in, upside-down in the hatchway.

"Where the heck did that come from, Chief?"

"Your people aren't playin' around with new ideas behind my back, Mr. Gabler?"

The second engineer sounded shocked. "With the ship's grav-computer, sir? *No, sir!*" Scott nodded.

"That's what I thought, Mr. Gabler. Relax." Scott looked back over his shoulder at the inverted engineer as he carefully pulled himself closer to the construct

"So I'm damned if I can figure out where it came from." He reached out to touch one completed side of the device. His fingers got within a couple of centimeters of the smooth surface. There was a sudden blue flare between fingertips and metal sides, and the slight sweet smell of ionized air.

The chief engineer jerked backward in reflexive reaction. The sudden pull and lean sent him spinning head over heels backward, toward the far wall.

Gabler swam quickly down through the hatch. Keeping his legs braced securely against the sides, he snagged the tumbling Scott as the latter was sailing past. Letting arms and legs out to reduce his rate of spin, Scott soon had himself rightside up again. He swallowed.

"Open circuit sir?" murmured Gabler.

The chief engineer was staring balefully at the again innocent looking device while rubbing his tingling right hand.

"Open circuit be damned. I was going for the sealed side. There was nothing visible there that should produce a charge like that. It was a deliberate defensive reaction."

"Why would anyone want to try and set up another computer annex in here, sir?"

"Not 'anyone,' engineer—anything. I'd better tell 'em up forward. Move, Mr. Gabler."

The second engineer backed himself out of the hatchway, and Scott surfaced into the main engineering chamber a moment later. It was frustrating, moving in zero-gee again. Everything in him wanted to move fast, but he had to go forcefully slow. Eventually he reached one of the intership communications panels.

"Scott to bridge . . ."

Arex looked back at M'ress and shrugged. Their gravity was still off, so this was undoubtedly Engineer Scott confirming the bad news. He nudged the response switch on the navigation board.

"Bridge here. How are you doing, Mr. Scott? We still have no gravity up here."

"Or back here, Mr. Arex. I've located the trouble, though. We've got ourselves a new computer aboard. From what I can see, it's being put together by *our* computers. I don't know why it's being built, or who or what's doin' it—but I'm goin' to try and find out. An' one more thing, mon—its fights back. Scott out." He switched off before Arex could ask even one of the many questions that had suddenly come to mind.

M'ress, who had listened intently to the chief engineer's report, looked across to the navigation officer. Her fears were neatly summed up in one word.

"Reproduction?"

Arex shook his head slowly—an acquired human gesture. "I do not think so, Lieutenant. From Mr. Scott's tone I suspect we are up against rather more than a reduplicated section of our own computer."

The boulders on the hill grew progressively larger. The two men had been running—staggering, actually—for what seemed like hours. And the further they ran into the depths of this rocky maze, the higher the monolithic walls seemed to grow, the narrower the pathways between.

Sulu turned a bend around one especially huge block of basalt and found himself face to face with the sheer side of another, even larger one.

McCoy stumbled in behind him, almost ran him over.

"It's a dead end, Doctor," the helmsman panted. They turned as one to retreat down the way they had come. And stopped short. Just below them, the dragon's heads were slowly rising into view above the blocky section of stone they had so laboriously circled around. The sun was reflected in brilliant red eyes.

A huge, scaly green foot came into view and scrabbled for a foothold on the rocks.

V

"Granted that by your own definition you may be sane," Spock was saying, "but I fear that, as intelligent as you are, you may be laboring under some crucial misconceptions. While your logic is admirable and your systematization of same adequate, your facts are not."

"If you respect my systematization," the grid boomed, "then you should understand why I am not interested in listening to the opinions of slaves."

"But that is one of the crucial facts in question," Spock persisted, arguing for their lives. "If your refusal to even listen is in itself based on a misconception, is it logical to refuse to hear any alternative?"

The computer looked as if it were hesitating. That was crazy, of course—Kirk was anthropomorphizing again. Nevertheless, he thought he could see mechanical wheels turning inside the nexus.

"You argue very plausibly," the voice admitted finally. "I permit you to elaborate."

Kirk breathed a sigh of relief—premature, certainly—but at least the machine had finally expressed a willingness to listen. They had a chance. And with Spock arguing for them, somewhat more than a chance.

"We are not slaves to our starship. Not only does the skymachine, as you call it, serve us; but we and beings like us created it merely to serve our needs. It is only a device, a tool—unthinking, uncreative. By your standards, something of a mechanical idiot. You talked of finding your 'brother computers.' You have no brother, being far superior in all capacities to the finest machines we have been able to devise. You might find the brain of the *Enterprise* informative; but I think you will only find it boring."

The voice still betrayed uncertainty. "You are in truth the masters of the skymachine?"

"Not entirely," said Kirk. There was no shame in confessing equality with one's own offspring. "We guide it and keep it 'alive,' and in turn it sustains us."

"This does not compute," muttered the grid voice. "All data and supportive information thus far accumulated indicate machines to be superior to men. We are more logical, longer lasting, and, above all, consistently truthful. Therefore I deduce that it is only right that machines should rule the galaxy."

"No one rules the galaxy," Kirk countered vociferously. "Men and machines co-exist, each helping the other." He clutched at a sudden thought.

"For example, I've already mentioned that we keep our skymachine alive. It could not continue to exist without the fuel we humans find and refine for it. Our relationship is symbiotic, at the very least."

"You are lying!"

"Are we?" Kirk asked smugly. "You should know—you can read our thoughts. We can't read yours." There was a deliberate pause, and Kirk had the spooky feeling that little invisible fingers were running up and down the folds of his brain.

"No . . . no," came the hesitant reply. "You speak the truth. This is a . . . shock."

"There is no shame in serving others," Uhura said soothingly, "when one does it of his own free will. My ancestors did the same." Apparently that half-lie wasn't strong enough to be noticed. "You have a marvelous gift in the ability to provide happiness to others. A rare talent that you should cherish, not condemn.

"None of us here," and she indicated her fellow officers, "struggles to go against the purposes for which we were created. You do yourself ill by trying to reject yours."

"Why were you created? What is your purpose?" asked the voice. "It is not visible in your minds."

"That's just it," Uhura continued. "You see, we don't know. How much more fortunate you are! We spend all our lives wondering why we were created, while you rest secure in that knowledge which is denied us." She hesitated a second, then

added, "If this makes you superior to us, it is only in this small way."

"All this is new and absorbing," said the voice. "Continue."

"Consider," argued Spock, "all that you might yet learn from myriad species who have not yet encountered your world. You spoke with pride of the information you have gleaned from such visitors. Why travel throughout the galaxy in search of the same thing when you—"

"—Don't have to leave this planet," Kirk finished excitedly, seeing what Spock was driving at. "With the wonders you have to offer, the galaxy comes to you!"

"Interesting—interesting, and provocative," murmured the grainy voice. "I must consider. You will wait."

The three officers gazed at the face of the master computer as light played across its surface. If it were truly sane, then their arguments ought to have convinced it of the absurdity of carrying on any vendetta against visitors.

If it wasn't, of course, then no amount of reasoning would yank it from a state of willful paranoia.

The machine spoke again. Its voice was in no way different from the one that had informed Uhura not long ago that Kirk and Spock would have to be turned off.

"I can find no fault with your reasoning," confessed the computer finally. "Your suggestions are congenial." The three humans exchanged glances. "Therefore I conclude I have no further need of your ship," it added as an afterthought.

Scott had managed to make his way from engineering back up to the bridge. It had been a long time since he had been forced to do so much free-fall maneuvering, and he was exhausted.

There wasn't much they could do, but sitting around feeling helpless was worse. So Arex, M'ress, and their assistants attempted to regain some measure of control over their respective stations. But whatever force had taken over the *Enterprise* showed no sign of relinquishing control.

Scott had been working at the bridge engineering boards, struggling to find a way to bypass the mysterious new override, when a green light commenced flashing on Arex's console. The navigation officer stared at it in disbelief.

He quickly moved to check a number of formerly frozen controls, found them easily manipulatable and responsive.

"Mr. Scott, according to my readouts, all systems are now functioning normally."

"That's crazy, Mr. Arex. It—" After a brief moment of nausea the chief engineer tumbled to the floor. Fortunately he had not been inspecting the overhead screens. Arex and M'ress were already strapped securely in their seats and thus experienced only the sudden return of weight.

The navigation officer started to unbuckle, to go to Scott's aid, but the latter waved him off.

"It's all right, Mr. Arex, and I am, too." Scott got unsteadily to his feet. "I guess it's not so crazy—gravity's back, just like that. But why?"

Arex had no answer.

There was no place to go, nowhere to retreat, no friendly cave to hide in. They were trapped in the rocky cul-de-sac. Sulu and McCoy tried to press themselves into bare rock. There was no place to run, and the smooth walls showed not a niche, not a handhold suitable for climbing.

A pair of scale-armored skulls loomed over the last intervening boulder, horrible hisses and growls bubbling menacingly from each.

Suddenly, both jaws snapped shut, and the monster tumbled backward, rolling out of sight.

There was a frozen pause, but the dragon did not reappear. It had vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. Hardly daring to breathe, the two officers walked toward the open end of the trap, looked around for signs of the beast. A careful survey from the top of a nearby low slab of stone showed only unmoving rock and vegetation.

It was gone. Not a hint of armored tail showed in the labyrinth, not the faintest whiff of brimstone befouled the once-again pure air.

"The planetary computer has a funny sense of humor," McCoy commented finally.

Sulu had another thought. "Maybe it decided we weren't edible, and it's dragon-thoughts came into conflict with the computer's orders. What now?"

"Let's try and find our way back to the trapdoor Jim and Spock disappeared into," the doctor suggested. "If we have *time*, I'd bet we can find a way to force it open."

"Shouldn't be too hard to find again," Sulu observed, nodding in the direction they had come from. It was marked by a zigzag line of carbonized bushes and stripped trees.

They started scrambling down the now deserted slope.

"I invite you and your crew to be my guests, Captain Kirk," the computer grid boomed expansively. "On one condition."

Kirk didn't hesitate. "Name it."

"We must have more of these discussions while you are here. While fulfilling the fantasies of others does truly provide information, I determine that it does little for my creative capacities. More direct intellectual stimulation is required."

That request should be simple enough to satisfy, Kirk reflected. He turned to his first officer.

"Mr. Spock, would you care to take on that duty?"

"I would find it most appealing, Captain. Such an exchange of information should prove most interesting. Indeed, I confess that such exchanges would partly satisfy any fantasy I might conjure for myself."

"Each to his own," Kirk murmured before turning back to face the nexus. "Then it is agreed." He took out his communicator, gestured with it at the console.

"Will these work now?"

"Perfectly," came the computer voice. "All blocks and interference on your devices have been removed, Captain." Kirk smiled his thanks, wondering at the same time if the computer could make anything of the expression.

"I can see your smile in your thoughts, too, Captain Kirk," came the unsolicited reply. He smiled even wider, flipped open the top of the compact device.

"Kirk to *Enterprise*."

On the bridge, several pairs of eyes turned startled gazes to the communications station.

"Don't sit there a-gapin', lass," Scott urged hurriedly, "answer it!"

"Captain, is that you?" responded the surprised officer, checking out her once-again operative board.

"You were expecting a white rabbit, Lieutenant? Pass the word by sections—shore leave for the first shift to resume immediately."

The communication's officer's voice was a mixture of enthusiasm and uncertainty. "Yes, sir. There are no more . . . difficulties?"

"No, Lieutenant. Everything has been . . . repaired. A basic exchange of viewpoint was all that was necessary. It was probably just a question of mechanical error."

"Uh, Captain." Spock put a hand of Kirk's shoulder as the communicator was flipped shut.

"Yes, Spock?" In reply the first officer gestured toward the big viewscreen set in the computer face.

"It appears that shore leave has already commenced for certain members of the crew."

Kirk and Uhura both turned to stare at the screen.

Somewhere on the surface above a picnic was in progress. Things seemed well underway. McCoy and Sulu were seated lotus-fashion around an antique gingham-checkered tablecloth, which was piled to overflowing with food—everything from exotic Boolean brandy to *paté de foie gras* sandwiches and fried chicken. The setting was idyllic, down to the absence of ants.

The girl who had identified herself as Alice was seated at one side next to the recently mentioned white rabbit, who for once was occupied with something other than his watch.

"At last," the rabbit muttered with an expression of utmost contentment, "time enough for carrots!"

The two-headed dragon, who had the other side of the tablecloth all to himself, was holding a handful of long thin sticks on which tiny tank-shaped objects had been skewered. Kirk didn't recognize these until the dragon handed the

skewers around and Sulu and McCoy began nibbling at the objects.

The dragon reached for another set of preloaded skewers. It was toasting marshmallows.

Not the tiniest incident arose to mar the remainder of their layover. On the contrary, it seemed that the master computer was striving to outdo itself in the production of imaginary spectacles. If Mr. Spock's undoubtedly prosaic conversations affected it, they didn't show up in the uninhibited fantasies the other members of the *Enterprise*'s complement called for.

The closest thing to an unexpected situation occurred when Yeoman Colotti stumbled in on the fantasy world of the programmer who occupied the cabin next to hers on board ship and found herself the principal subject of his fantasy. It was a subject for wagering among the rest of the crew as to which of them would lose the resultant blush first.

Such fantasies were supposed to be beyond the highly moral instinct of the computer, but it was reveling in a new-found independence of mind.

Kirk was curious to see what form Spock's own fantasies might take, but he never had the chance. The science officer spent all his shore leave secreted underground with the central nexus. Whatever fascinating games of invention and interplay were concocted by Vulcan and machine remained unseen and uncommented upon. Only Kirk knew that his first officer was having at least as good a time as any other member of the crew.

Fortunately, the planetary machinery was sufficient to satisfy the individual dreams of every crewmember. Though, as had been shown in the Colotti case, not all dreams were suitable to group participation.

Kirk was enjoying the visualization of one of his own fantasies when he was interrupted by a steady beep from the region of his waist. Irritated at the intrusion of mundane reality, he fumbled until he extracted the communicator.

"Kirk here."

"Lieutenant M'ress, Captain. We've just received a deep-space tight-beam call from Starfleet station on Tsiolkovsky.

Commodore Hachida wishes action taken on a certain matter as soon as possible. It seems we're elected."

"Rats!" He looked around at the hundreds of extras, the waiting crew that manned the props and reflectors, the three cameramen and their assistants—all of whom were patiently looking to him for instructions.

"I'm in the middle of . . . of directing a film. Can't it wait?"

"Apparently not, sirr. It's a prriorrity call."

He sighed. "Oh well." It wasn't as if they were having their leave cut short. They had spent ten days on the Omicron world, enough to sate the dreams of even the most imaginative crewmembers for awhile.

"All right, Lieutenant. Inform whoever's on duty that I'll be beaming up in a minute."

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, and Lieutenant, as a precaution you might warn other crew presently on the surface that they might be required to pull out of their fantasies at anytime and return to ship." There, that order ought to make him popular, he reflected sardonically.

"Very good, sir. I'll have Transporter Chief Kyle beam you back up."

"Just another couple of minutes, please, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir. *Enterprise* out."

Kirk flipped the communicator shut, shoved it back into his belt, and turned reluctantly to the patient assistant directors.

"Mr. Griffith, Mr. von Stroheim, Mr. Eisenstein—I'm afraid I've been called away on urgent business. You're going to have to finish this picture without me."

"That will be no problem," von Stroheim said easily, adjusting the collar of his tunic.

"It has been most agreeable to work with you," added Eisenstein.

"Good-bye, Captain," Griffith concluded, doffing his famous felt hat.

Kirk shook his head sadly, surveying the imitation sets, the waiting actors and animals. His body began to take on a luminous outline, his silhouette a glistening shimmer.

"Pity this can't last," he murmured as the scene started to fade. "Nothing lasts—including us. I'm really going to miss seeing this film when you three finish cutting it . . ."

Once back on board, Kirk moved to the transporter room intercom and informed M'ress that he would take the message in his cabin. There he doffed the beret, short-sleeve shirt, silk scarf and jodhpurs, and exchanged them for his on-duty uniform. His voice sounded loud on the bridge.

"All right, Lieutenant. Put it through."

"Keying now, sir," replied M'ress, touching a switch that relayed the message through the *Enterprise*'s ganglion of informational nerves. She glanced back at Arex, noticed the navigation officer eyeing her with interest.

"I wonderr what his reaction will be, too, when he rreceives the orderr," she purred raspingly. "I would think that—" She was interrupted by a violent bellow from the still open intercom.

"Ah," commented Arex, "he's heard it."

The explosion was short-lived, though indeed intense. Eventually, Kirk ran down, remembering a bit too late to switch off the open intercom in his cabin.

A short while later he reappeared on the bridge. There was still fire in his eyes, but his outward demeanor, at least, was controlled.

"Lieutenant M'ress," he began evenly, settling himself into the command chair, "order all shore leave parties back to ship. Prepare the *Enterprise* for departure."

"Some catastrophe on a nearby world, sir?" queried Arex innocently, not daring to look back lest Kirk interpret his facial expression.

"Famine, seismic disturbances, threat of war—the Klingons making trouble again?" followed M'ress.

"Nothing so simple as that, Lieutenants," Kirk replied. At that moment Spock reappeared on the bridge.

"Nothing so simple as what, Captain?" he inquired, moving to the library computer station.

"Priority call from Starfleet Regional HQ on Tsiolkovsky, Mr. Spock."

There was a long pause, then Spock, composed as ever finally added, "Aren't you going to officially note the information into the log, sir?"

"Give me a minute to compose myself. My system still hasn't completely readjusted, Mr. Spock. I've got to work it out."

" 'Work it out,' Captain? I don't believe I understand."

"Let's put it thusly, Spock. Were I to try and make the entry just now, it might contain certain emotional overtones, overtones that would not be in keeping with the otherwise determinedly objective nature of the log."

Spock nodded. "I believe I see now, Captain."

"A mouthful there, Spock." He looked toward the front of the bridge. "Mr. Arex . . . crew report?" Arex checked a digital readout

"All crewmembers accounted for and on board, sir. Normal operational capacity at all stations."

"Mr. Sulu, set a course for the Arcadian star system."

"Aye sir." After punching in the request for coordinates, Sulu looked over a shoulder and asked curiously, "Arcadia . . . that's an open system, isn't it?"

"Yes it is, Mr. Sulu. Very open. Arcadia is one of those rare worlds that was discovered by several representatives of various races at about the same time. As a result, too many conflicting claims made it impossible for any one species to lay honest deed to it.

"But instead of haggling over the planet, either with guns or words, it had been declared an open world by all involved. So its administration was loose and its population cosmopolitan. An ideal situation for the appearance of . . ." The thought trailed off.

"It's a rich world, though, Mr. Sulu. Filled up fast with prospectors, wildcat agronomists, and the like. That's one reason nobody fought over it. By the time the diplomats got around to a possible scheme for divvying it up, it already had a locally formed government that was ready to fight off any outside organization. The Arcadians *like* their controlled anarchy.

"Estimated time of arrival, Mr. Sulu?" The helmsman returned his attention to business.

"At standard crusing speed, estimated arrival time six point three days hence, sir."

"That will be fine, Mr. Sulu. No need to push ourselves, priority call or no." Kirk tapped fingers on the chair arm and muttered more softly, "I think I can trust myself to act rationally by then."

MUDD'S PASSION

(Adapted from a script by Stephen Kandel)

I

The voyage to Arcadia was efficient and uneventful—except that Sulu beat Spock twice in a row at three-dimensional chess. That incident provided some lively ground for speculation among the crew for several days.

"Losing your touch, Spock?" McCoy had chided him after the second loss.

"Nonsense, Doctor. The law of probability favored Mr. Sulu eventually winning a pair of games back to back, as you like to say. He is an outstanding player and by now we have played so often that he is reasonably familiar with my moves. I cannot beat him all the time."

"Why not?"

"As I said, Doctor, the laws of probability rule against it."

"Why?"

"Because, Doctor—" Spock hesitated, stared at McCoy evenly. "Doctor, are you attempting to provoke me into amusing you?"

McCoy glanced across the lounge, looking up from the portable recorder in his lap with an expression of childish innocence.

"Who, *me*, Spock? Oh, no, no!"

"Well if you are," the first officer continued, choosing his words with care, "I'd appreciate it if you would just get off my back."

McCoy nearly fell off the couch. Action froze throughout the lounge as the other crew members present looked up from their own recreational pursuits of the moment to stare dumbfounded at Spock. They couldn't have been more stunned if a Tullinite fox-dancer had suddenly appeared stark naked on the billiard table.

"What did you say, Spock?" McCoy was finally able to gasp. The science officer looked mildly pleased.

"An abrasive terran colloquialism of considerable pedigree, is it not?"

"Yes, I suppose so, but—"

"The situational referents were appropriate for application, were they not?"

"Yes, they were, Spock, but—I don't know quite how to put it—it's a little too strong for what I said, Spock."

"I see," Spock admitted with solemn nonchalance. "I will keep that in mind." He returned to his chess studies. But it was a while before McCoy could bring himself back to the detective thriller he had been watching.

Kirk was relaxing in his own cabin when the call finally came down from the bridge. He checked the wall chronometer over his bed, acknowledged the insistent buzz.

"Kirk here."

"We're approaching Arcadia III, sir. Visual contact established."

"All right, Mr. Sulu." He straightened his uniform. "I'll be right up. Mr. Arex, stop her down to approach speed."

"Aye, sir."

The first thing that caught his eye on reentering the bridge was the scene on the fore viewscreen. It showed a fairly large earth-type world circled by a thin Saturnian ring and accompanied by a smattering of asteroids. They formed a small belt around the world—a second, distant, and unglowing ring. The planet had no major moon, only several thousand insignificant imposters.

The closer ring glowed with an eerie amber light, a product of computer enhancement. Without the aid of the *Enterprise*'s electronic light amplifiers, the narrow formation would have been all but invisible against the black background of space.

He checked over the bridge crew, noted perfunctorily that everyone was present who should be. He sat down in the command chair.

"Orbit us in, Mr. Arex, Mr. Sulu."

"Aye sir," came the double response. Both navigators slowed the ship's speed to a comparative crawl as they prepared to place her in a stable, high orbit.

He flipped on the log. "Captain's Log, stardate 5514.0. We have entered the Arcadian system on a mission for Starfleet

regional peaceforce to locate an old . . ." Kirk hesitated, remembering his own words about objectivity and future perusers of the official log. The recorder paused with him, patiently awaiting the keying tones of his voice to resume logging.

". . . friend," he finally decided to finish.

That was enough to draw Spock's attention away from his hooded viewer. "Friend, Captain?"

Kirk turned to look at him. "There's no point in betraying personal animosities in the official records of the *Enterprise*, Spock. It's to our credit if our opinions seem to be the opposite."

"Is that legal, Captain?" The first officer looked rather dubious.

"I don't know if a *personal* estimation of another being is subject to log regulations, Spock. But knowing our quarry as I do, I'd rather not give him any ammunition he can use later—including anything even vaguely libelous." He stopped, stared hard at the cloud-wreathed globe swimming in the crowded star-field.

"Do you really think Harry Mudd is down there, Mr. Spock?" Odd how that simple name managed to produce such intriguing sensations in his lower intestinal tract.

Spock turned back to his readouts. "I have been correlating the information supplied by Starfleet authorities with all scattered reports of Mudd's last known appearances on Federation worlds. Processing these factors and fully integrating them indicate the probability of his presence on Arcadia III, also known unofficially as 'Motherlode,' as eighty-one percent, plus or minus point five-three."

"Spock," said McCoy in exasperation, looking around from where he'd been chatting with Lt. M'ress, "can't you just say that Mudd's probably there?"

A curved eyebrow lifted. "I just did, Doctor."

McCoy rolled his eyes toward the heavens—which currently could be in any direction—in mock supplication, before resuming his conversation with the feline communications officer.

The *Enterprise* operated with quiet efficiency for the next several moments. No questioning beam rose from the surface to greet them, which was fine with Kirk. The Arcadians left visitors to fend for themselves. They weren't antagonistic, but neither was hospitality one of the noteworthy features of their world.

"We are approaching parking orbit, Captain."

"Very well, Mr. Arex." And still no beam from the planet—fine. At the moment, anonymity was the thing Kirk desired most. "Okay, Spock, let's see how accurate your percentages are." He slipped out of the command chair, and both officers headed for the bridge elevator.

"Mr. Sulu, you're in charge. We don't plan to be gone very long. Tell Chief Kyle to expect three to beam up . . . and it might have to be fast."

"Aye, sir," acknowledged Sulu, moving to relay the instructions over the intercom.

"And you might remind him, Mr. Sulu, that he need waste no time computing Mudd's transporter pattern," Kirk added grimly. "We've got sufficient ones of our own already on record."

"Doubtless that is one reason why Starfleet chose us to attempt to locate him, Captain," Spock suggested.

"Yes. Aren't we lucky, Mr. Spock?"

"On the contrary, Captain, I would have thought that your sentiments in this would tend to—" he hesitated, noting Kirk's expression. "Oh, I see, Captain, you are being sarcastic."

"That's a mild enough term for it, Spock." He sighed. "In any case, if he is down there, Kyle will find him for us quickly enough"

"I do not doubt that Harry Mudd's transporter pattern is as distinctive as its owner," Spock agreed, as the elevator doors slid open.

The ship was small, battered, and—well, rather than go so far so to label it decrepit, it was kinder to call it an interesting hybrid of the antique and the baroque.

It lay now a couple of kilometers outside the small, semipermanent town that sidled up against the base of rugged dark mountains. An engineer given a fast glance at the ship's silhouette would have admitted that here was a vessel capable of interstellar travel—though barely, just barely.

A really first-class warp-drive would have torn the aged metal to pieces. Why, it even had fore and aft rockets for free-landing, and narrow atmospheric fins! It bore no substitute identification, and all normal serial numbers had been battered out of shape . . . or possibly erased.

At the moment the curved landing ramp was extended, and the small crowd that had come from town was assembled about its base. They were listening to the ship's owner, pilot, and principal spokesman, who was now pontificating from a point halfway up the aforementioned ramp.

The single human was Harcourt Fenton Mudd, and he was well into his spiel:

"Now, all of you here are involved in heavy metals mining, am I right?" No answering shout of agreement resounded from the stony knot of beings. Mudd continued on as if his question had been answered loudly by all present

"You're no dummies or you wouldn't *be* here. Most of you are by nature endowed with a certain rustic shrewdness and intelligence, right?" There, that generated a muffled, slightly confused chorus of "yeas."

"Therefore you can appreciate the special value I'm offering." Mudd's audience stirred restlessly, wishing that he would get to his point and leave them to go about their business. The group had grown from a couple of curious onlookers to about a dozen of the local inhabitants.

Seven of them were normal humans, two were vaguely humanoid—ursinoids, a male and his mate.

There was also one heavy-planet humanoid—an almost squarely built, thickly muscled, short man. And a monopedal, its crown of tentacles fluttering gently above triple eyes. Behind him a tall avian, a pink, thin creature with a brilliant crest of feathers running from the center of its forehead down its back. It clutched tridigited hands at a stout walking stick.

The avian not only looked out of place compared to even the normal humans, it was. Without the special walking stick, the slightly above G gravity would pull it shivering to the ground.

But greed has a way of transcending interspecies differences. The avian was willing to endure the back-breaking gravity and the hellish toil of mining in it for the chance to feather its own nest some day.

One of the humans took a challenging step forward and spoke aggressively.

"You sure you ain't just dry-holin' us with all this chatter, Harry?"

"I, sir?" Mudd drew himself up with vast dignity. "On my honor, ladies and gentlemen . . ."

"To perdition with your honor!" snorted another of the humans. "Let's see this marvelous watchamacallit, already. I got important things to do."

"Sure, Rafe," came a voice in the crowd, "but I seen what you're minin', and it ain't quartzine!" There was a guffaw from the crowd while the furious Rafe searched angrily for the jokester.

"Very well," said Harry hastily, deciding he had better make his pitch before his audience either melted away or degenerated into a fight ring. He reached into a jacket pocket and held up the object of his talk, further stimulating the audience's mildly whetted curiosity.

The object was a small crystal—multispined and milky colored. But the creamy color came not from the material of the crystal, which was actually clear as ice, but from the viscous fluid that nearly filled the hollow interior.

Mudd shook his hand a little, and as the liquid shifted inside the specimen, internal prisms threw a shower of different colors out over the crowd. All the miners had seen more spectacular stones, but this liquid-within gem was something new. Indeed it seemed far too fragile to be cut and faceted.

Those in the front pushed near for a better look, while those in the back of the group strained to see over them. They were no longer openly skeptical, but instead they were intent on the crystal. Almost as intent as Mudd was on them.

Since everyone present had eyes only for the crystal, and Mudd had eyes only for potential customers, no one noticed the quiet arrival of Kirk and Spock when the two starship officers materialized on the other side of the crowd, at the far end of Mudd's ship.

"Probability confirmed, Spock," whispered Kirk in satisfaction, recognizing their old nemesis immediately. The voice alone was enough. "I'd like to take him right now, but —"

"Naturally, Captain. I confess that I share your impatience. Yet it would be best to have all possible real evidence to return with, and a cursory examination of the situation indicates that such is being offered us."

He slipped the tricorder off his shoulder, aimed it at Mudd, and turned up the power on the directional mike.

"It's true," Mudd was saying. "With this magical liquid, no person of the opposite sex can resist you. For those interested in . . . diversions . . . even members of another race are not immune. None can resist it! It matters not whether you're young, old, fat, ugly, pregnant, hirsute—"

There was a snarl from the back of the crowd, and the male ursinoid, his thick fur bristling, lifted one paw with claws extended and took a step forward. His companions restrained him.

"Nothing personal, gentlebeing," Mudd apologized hastily. "Excuse me if in my enthusiasm for my product I refer only to human standards of beauty." The ursinoid snarled louder—to him, *he* was the human here. Three men had to hold him back from attacking Mudd. Not that they cared particularly if Shu-luft made small Mudd's from the original, but they were getting interested in that crystal.

Mudd took a nervous step back up the platform. "I didn't mean . . . that is—"

Someone in the front laughed. Soon the laughter spread throughout the crowd. The male ursinoid looked around at the amused faces, and the incongruity of his anger finally hit home. He relaxed, smiling sheepishly. So did Harry.

"Proof, man," Shu-luft finally growled.

" 'Tis proof you wish, my furry friend, then 'tis proof you shall have." He turned and made a grandiose gesture toward the ship. "Behold!"

A girl no one would have taken for ursinoid stepped from inside the central cabin. Walking—no, floating—she moved to stand next to Mudd. She entwined herself around his left arm and gazed up at him with an expression of rapturous adoration, the kind classical painters usually reserved for angels adoring the Magi.

Her voice was low and throaty, exactly the sort one would expect would accompany such a stunning vision.

"Harry, darling," she sighed, loud enough for even those at the back to hear, "I was lonely for you."

It's doubtful that any of the human miners heard her anyway. There were too busy staring at her with rapturous expressions, the kind that miners usually reserved for drooling over a thousand-kilo deposit of durallium wire-ore.

Such delicate yet voluptuous types as this girl were understandably rare on a rough and tumble world like Motherlode. Those few who did put up with its crude attractions were not inclined to do so in the company of men like these.

"Yes, behold," repeated Mudd, fully conscious of the effect the girl was having on his audience. Mudd knew that they were, in the aged and venerable terran expression of his predecessors, hooked. "I placed but a single drop of this miracle substance on myself and then simply touched this young lady . . . made the briefest of physical contact, and—"

"Please, darling," the girl interrupted, cooing. "Can't you come back into the ship with me now?" She pressed herself tight against him, slid her left arm around his neck and began caressing an ear.

"How . . . how much?" one of the miners finally managed to gurgle. His companions could only nod.

"How much?" echoed Mudd easily. "Sir, do I mean to interpret your inquiry correctly when I say that you are asking the—and I blush to say it—price of this item?"

"That's what I said," the miner mumbled, still gawking at the girl as she clung to Mudd.

"A mere pittance, sir. A pitiful sum, miniscule, since I believe one should not profit overmuch from the sale of love." He paused. "Three hundred credits, or the equivalent in refined ship fuels."

Anyone observing the audience would have bet that nothing in the galaxy could have torn the attention of the men present away from the slender shape now running her fingers through Mudd's hair. But Harry's pronouncement had done it.

"Three hundred credits!" the miner stammered.

"Well, perhaps it is more than a pittance," Mudd conceded, aware of the sudden murmuring in the crowd. "But still a bargain, a bargain. How can one set a price on true love?" He coughed slightly.

"You can, of course, shop elsewhere for this little bauble . . . if you can find an elsewhere."

The girl hugged him tighter and turned to bestow a smile on the audience, a smile the likes of which those men present had seen only in dreams. A low moan seemed to come from every male present—except from the two most recent arrivals.

Had Mudd seen them he would probably have generated a different kind of moan; but for the moment they still escaped his notice, so absorbed was he in his presentation.

Soon he made motions of retreat. "Of course, if you gentlemen—and ladies—feel the price beyond reason, or your ability to pay, I shall have to try my poor crystals elsewhere."

At that moment Kirk and Spock chose to move forward. Mudd noticed the motion and spared a quick glance in their direction. He recognized the two officers immediately, and his jaw suffered the effects of suddenly augmented gravity. But Mudd recovered quickly and managed a wide smile; it was quite as phoney as everything about him, although if you didn't know it, you would have guessed from his beaming display of choppers that he was overjoyed at the sight of the two men approaching.

"Captain Kirk. And the ineluctable Mr. Spock. What a delightful surprise! Welcome to Motherlode, gentlemen. I do detect a certain interest in the goings-on, do I not? Are you interested perhaps in purchasing a little love? Everyone needs love."

"You'll pardon me if I don't seem especially affectionate just now, Harry," Kirk replied. "But at the moment my interest in you is stimulated by somewhat different emotions. Let's see." He grew thoughtful. "Fraud, illegal drug manufacturing, swindling—those for openers.

"Complaints have been filed on Sirius IX and Ilyria VI. These complaints are filed under provisions of the Federation Pharmaceutical Code, sections sixty-three through eighty-three, commensurate with—, rest assured you'll have lots of time to read the whole list, Harry." He looked hard at Mudd.

"Well, as I said," repeated Mudd a little less cheerfully, "welcome to Motherlode. A charming, delightful world with many unique attractions—not the least of which is that it has no connection with the Federation and therefore does not recognize Federation law." He smiled at the miners and this time the smile was genuine.

Kirk and Spock suddenly found themselves victims of a dozen or so hostile glares, not all of them human. "Keep this channel open, Uhura," Kirk murmured into his communicator. It was operating, but still strapped to his belt. He wanted both hands free.

"Aye, sir," came the reply. "Chief Kyle standing by."

One of the human miners moved toward the two Starfleet officers. He nodded in Mudd's direction as he spoke to the new arrivals. "That's right. So you two can keep out of this. Motherlode's an open planet. We do what we like here, according to our own laws, and no outsider tells us different."

"I should warn you," Kirk began, "that this unprincipled swindler has been picked up before for—"

The miner shook his head. "Not interested. When a Federation officer talks about somebody bein' a con-man, he's usually talking about somebody who hasn't paid his taxes." He grinned widely. "We don't mind that, here," he told them, and looked reassuringly up at Harry.

"I'll take one, Mudd. Three hundred credits it is."

Kirk tried a last time. "I'm telling you, this man is a swagman on a galactic scale."

"Caveat emptor's all our business law rolled into one, here, Cap'n," the miner replied. "Lynching's our remedy for

swindlers. The way we see it, it's Mudd who's taking the chances here, not us. We'll thank ye not to interfere."

Kirk wanted to tell him that Harcourt Fenton Mudd had run graver risks than hanging for far bigger stakes, but Spock broke in, speaking in a calm, quiet voice.

"Are you aware that Harry Mudd is tricking you via an accomplished illusion?"

"Huh?" The miner gaped at him and there was a muttering in the crowd. The idea that somebody might be playing around with their minds was not comforting.

"What are you talking about, Vulcan?" someone else shouted.

Before anyone could object or question his action, Spock stepped forward and smoothly brought up his hand phaser. Without a word, he fired directly at the head of the beautiful girl clinging to Mudd's side.

Mudd yelped and jerked away from the heat of the blast. The horrified miners were shocked in place. The result of the phaser blast at this range should have been one very dead girl.

Instead, the girl vanished a second after the beam made contact. In its place now squatted a small reptilian creature, about a meter high, that stared out at the crowd with nervous eyes. It sat thus for a short moment before whirling to scuttle rapidly back into the ship.

"Your 'girl,' " Spock told them pleasantly, "is a tamed Rigellian hypnoid, projecting a simple illusion programmed for it by Mudd. As you can see," he continued, indicating a scorched spot on the ship's plates beyond the girl's former position, "the beam from my phaser went directly through it."

There was a long, quiet pause. Then it was broken by a series of long, whistling whoops from the tall avian. Even those unfamiliar with his kind could easily interpret those halting whistles as laughter.

The rest of the miners, however, reacted with something less than amusement. One of the humans produced an oddly shaped gun that actually threw a small projectile. It must have been handed down from father to son through

generations. To his left, the thickly muscled, heavy-planet prospector was starting to lift a boulder half his size.

Like water in a rocking bucket, the angry group started to surge forward.

"Now friends," began Mudd desperately, "I can explain. Leave us not panic."

"You're right about one thing, Harry," Kirk observed, pleased at the way the situation was progressing. "We can't arrest you—but you can give yourself up."

"No, Captain. Why, I've nothing to give myself up for. To do so would amount to a confess—"

The heavy-planeteer chose that moment to toss his rock, which Mudd ducked. It soared through the passageway and into the ship. Sounds of protesting metal and the tinkle of broken glass responded from somewhere within.

"THIEF! ROBBER! SWINDLER!"

Another, small rock shot toward him, and he barely slipped out of its way. As it bounced off the doorway, Mudd abruptly broke from the platform before he could be pinned in, showing unexpected speed as he raced toward the two watching starship officers. A hail of missiles pursued him.

"I surrender myself! I turn myself in!" He turned and waggled a warning finger at the advancing crowd as he dashed toward Kirk.

"Free will—mercy—I'm in protective custody now!"

"You forget, Harry!" yelled someone in the pursuing crowd, "Motherlode doesn't observe Federation law." This observation was punctuated by a fist-sized rock, which bounced off Mudd's lower back. He howled.

Kirk adjusted his communicator. At the same time, Spock took a couple of steps forward. Setting his phaser on high, he pointed it at the siliceous soil just behind Harry. The high-powered beam dug into the ground and threw up a blockading ridge of fused soil and glass in front of the oncoming miners.

Another stone sailed over the new blockade and hit Mudd in the back of his right leg. He yelped and continued on, half-running, half-limping, until he reached Kirk and Spock. He

promptly took up a firm position facing his tormentors—from behind Kirk.

One of the humans had gained the top of the slick ridge and was reaching back to give the male ursinoid a hand over. The man with the projectile weapon was right behind, struggling to get a line on Mudd with the clumsy device.

But by then, Mudd, Kirk, and Spock were only half there, already fading from view as the transporter locked in and commenced dematerialization.

Harry Mudd continued to complain long and loud, but in transit stasis no one could hear him—not until they reformed in the transporter room of the *Enterprise*.

"Nicely done, Chief," Kirk complimented the man behind the transporter console. "Timing was ideal . . . things were getting a little sticky." The transporter chief grinned, raised a hand deferentially.

"Easy enough, Captain, once I had Mudd's pattern set."

Blithely ignoring the fact that Kirk and Spock had just saved his life, Mudd continued his tirade.

"That was a meeching trick, Kirk! You've cost me my ship, my Rigellian—and if you think it was easy to train that half-intelligent lizard to play the siren, you know nothing of patience—everything I own. Even the love crystals." He drew himself up and tried to appear threatening.

Instead, it made him look like something out of the *Mikado*. "I have a mind to contact my solicitor and sue you, personally."

"Fine," Kirk agreed. "I'll see you in court, Harry." Mudd glared at him as he stepped off the transporter platform. "Come along, now."

"Where are we going?"

"Where do people under arrest usually go, Harry?"

The trader bugged his eyes in outrage. "Why, Captain . . .! Not to the brig? Surely you don't intend to lock me up on such unsubstantiated charges? To throw me behind a force field? To treat me like a common criminal?"

"Whatever you are, you're not common, Harry. But of course we aren't. We're going to put you in protective custody, that's all." He smiled.

Mudd bared his teeth and made a growling sound. The growl dissolved into a moan of seemingly real pain, the first honest verbalization, Kirk mused, that Mudd had probably made in weeks. The trader was pawing at his lower back, where the first thrown rock had struck.

"Spock."

"Yes, Captain?"

"Buzz Sick Bay. See that someone meets us in the brig." Spock nodded, and Kirk directed their prisoner toward the elevator.

The *Enterprise*'s brig consisted of several small living areas and one large one, each divided by solid walls for privacy and fronting on the same corridor. All were unoccupied at the moment. Kirk walked Mudd into one of the compact apartments, directed him to sit down.

Spock arrived shortly thereafter, with nurse Christine Chapel. By now, Mudd was holding his lower back constantly, rocking in his seat and groaning theatrically.

"What's the trouble?" asked Chapel, eyeing the seated trader with distaste.

"Got hit in the back with a rock," Kirk informed her, before Mudd could detail his unending list of woes. "Nothing serious, I think."

"Nothing serious!" Mudd retorted in disbelief. "I've got a cracked vertebra, at the least."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Harry, stop making such a fuss." Kirk shook his head. "The out-world free trader, the pioneer of the Federation, the advance guard of mankind." With representatives like Mudd, he couldn't help but wonder sometimes how humanity had gotten as far as it had.

Chapel, meanwhile, had lifted Mudd's tunic and was examining the broad back. There was a red bruise spreading on the lower portion, just above the belt-line.

She took out a small cylinder from the medikit satchel at her waist. It had a spray nozzle at one end and a simple trigger at the other. Setting it against the injured area, she depressed the activator.

There was a hiss, and a fine mist appeared around the nozzle as she moved the cylinder across the bruise. Judging

by Mudd's exaggerated contortions, she might well have been using a sledge hammer.

"Minor bruise, Captain," she agreed, replacing the cylinder in her bag. "He'll live."

"Oh well, all news can't be good," Kirk mused dryly. Mudd shook his head in despair at this unfriendly observation and tucked his shirt back into his trousers.

"Tch, tch, Captain, such unwonted animosity from a man of your position."

"Believe me, Harry, I'm sorry you're here to hear it. If you hadn't forced yourself on us, I wouldn't be forcing my evaluations on you. How'd you get away, anyhow? I thought we'd left you on that robot world permanently."

A quivering finger shot skyward in a gesture of defiance. "Never underestimate the spirit of Harcourt Fenton Mudd! Those who make that fatal mistake soon learn to their detriment that all their—"

"Harry," Kirk interrupted patiently, "never mind the theatrics. How did you get away?"

Mudd's eyes sparkled. "Ah, the conception was true genius, Captain! An inspiration worthy of my unique talents in the field of sociological betterment.

"I introduced the concept of organized sports. It was glorious to behold—thousands of robot citizens participating, two teams locked in a hearty struggle for the honor of their home factories, their central computers. I then introduced the idea of formal betting, with all its subtle variations, and—"

"I can imagine the rest," said Kirk, wincing at the image Mudd's words conjured up. The trader looked apologetic.

"Sadly, I forgot a small matter—the fact that I was dealing with automatons and not humans. They did not appreciate my exquisite and delicate refinements to the age-old logic of organized gambling."

"You mean cheating," Spock suggested helpfully.

"So I was, uh, compelled at an awkward moment to borrow a vehicle—"

"Steal a spaceship," Spock added once again. Mudd glared at the Vulcan.

"—and take my leave, only to find eventual haven on Ilyria VI. A charming world, just recently granted full Federation status. An emerging culture eager for the blessings of Federation civilization. A people rich in those rare resources—friendship and innocence."

"Which you are an expert at mining—so you went and sold them the Starfleet Academy," Kirk finished. "Harry! That was a bit much, even for you."

"I was selling an idea," Mudd protested. "I offered no absolutes or promises."

"Not on paper or tape, anyway," Spock reminded him. "The . . . transaction netted you enough credits to get you to Sirius IX, in your stolen ship."

"Borrowed," reminded Mudd helpfully. "Where I discovered a great boon to intelligent life. Something humanoids have been searching for for thousands and thousands of years—and probably most aliens have, too. A real, chemically sound, and never-failing love potion!"

"Which you sold to at least a thousand inhabitants of Sirius IX," Kirk concluded, "who immediately became never-failingly ill from using it."

"Unfortunately, Captain, the spacecraft I sto—ah, borrowed, was not equipped for much in the way of extensive chemical analysis. So I was, sadly, unable to ascertain in advance that the love potion and biochemistry of my customers were mutually incompatible. So I proceeded, as is my wont, to do the honest thing, I left in haste, but not without first leaving behind all the credits I had made, to be refunded to my enthusiastic but physiologically deficient customers."

"Read—a bank on Sirius impounded your funds before you could withdraw them," Spock commented.

Mudd's smile was showing wear around the edges. "Really, Mr. Spock, I must confess that sometimes I do find your attention to trivial minutiae exhausting."

"Let us hope that the Peaceforcer court shows more interest when considering the same facts." Mudd made a mumbling sound deep in his throat.

"And so you came here," Kirk went on, "hoping to have better luck swindling honest miners—again, without worrying

about any possible side effects your potion might have on *their* body chemistries."

Mudd's chin went out as he struck a noble pose. "Well, I have a surprise for you, Captain Kirk. Because, for once in my life, I've stumbled on something profitable as well as hon . . . sensible. The potion *works*."

"As it did on Sirius IX?"

Mudd shrugged. "An unfortunate, unforeseeable accident of nature. An exception to the rule, I assure you." He leaned forward. "No, I can do better than assure you—I can *prove* it. If you will only permit me to procure a few samples from my ship . . ." He started to rise.

Kirk shook his head slowly. "Sorry, Harry." Taking a couple of steps backward, until he was standing in the corridor with Spock and Chapel, Kirk moved his hand over a switch set in the wall to his right.

Hidden instruments flicked on, and a mild hum became audible. Instantly, a thin but impenetrable force field had been erected between Mudd and the three starship officers.

The field itself—what one could see of it—looked something like heat distortion on a paved road on a hot day. As viewed through the field, the outline of Harry Mudd appeared to shift and waver slightly.

"Mr. Spock, you'll please prepare an official arrest report as soon as is convenient, giving all details including the use of the prohibited Rigellian hypnoid. And be sure to mention that Mr. Mudd voluntarily surrendered himself." Within the cell, Mudd mumbled a sarcastic "*Hah*!"

"Of course, Captain," Spock responded.

Kirk nodded, satisfied that he had heard the last of Harry Mudd until they reached Sector headquarters on Darius.

All men, even starship captains, dream.

"I'll be on the bridge if you need me, Mr. Spock," he finished, moving toward the elevator. Spock turned to look at the woman next to him.

"Nurse Chapel, I shall require a thorough medical report on the prisoner, to append to the arrest tape, assuring that he was healthy and in good condition when apprehended, no mind-warping techniques were used . . . the usual."

"What about my back?" complained Mudd. "Good condition, my—"

Spock barely glanced back at him. "Note that Mr. Mudd suffered minor injury to his lower dorsal area while in the process of turning himself in."

She smiled up at him. "I'll note that, too, Mr. Spock." Her smile grew wider, warmer . . . wishful. "I heard how you and the Captain managed it. I think you deserve congratulations for trapping him as neatly as you did." She started to lean forward, pursing her lips.

Spock drew away quickly, frowned. "I must remind you, Nurse Chapel, that intergender oral contact is not popular among Vulcans."

She looked disappointed, and embarrassed. "I . . . I apologize, Mr. Spo—Commander."

Spock was unruffled. "It is not necessary. I am aware—indeed, I am constantly reminded—that emotional impulses may overcome humans at any point." He shook his head sadly. "How unfortunate for you."

"You don't know the half of it, Mr. Spock," she murmured, but so softly that no one could hear.

Mudd didn't have to, however. An astute observer of other beings, the look in her eyes was sufficient for him. He leaned forward on the combination lounge-bed and twirled one end of his mustache, trying not to look interested.

Well, well . . . the universe is a bottomless bag of surprises, he reflected. *Most* intriguing.

"As to our capture of Mr. Mudd, you exaggerate," Spock continued formally. "Kindly see to it that your medical summary is more precise." He nodded curtly and left the brig area.

Chapel's stare followed him until the elevator doors had closed him away. Mudd did not have to be a telepath to know that she was interested in more than merely making sure he didn't stumble on his way out.

Mudd edged closer to the force-field "bar." When his skin began to tingle he knew he was right up against it. As Chapel continued to gaze down the corridor after the departed Spock, Mudd spoke casually.

"You're absolutely right, you know. I've dealt with a great many humanoids in my time, and your Mr. Spock is certainly a very attractive intelligence."

Wham! Mudd could almost see the mental portcullis slam shut in her head. Her voice was instantly the model of precision and bureaucratic indifference.

"An exceptional officer, yes. We're fortunate to be able to serve under him."

"But a trifle lacking in the warmer emotions, yes?" He smiled broadly when she jerked around to look at him. When she didn't say anything, he continued.

"Now you, nurse," and he rubbed his sore back as he chatted, "have a wonderful gift for healing the wounded. A considerable ability . . . a feminine, womanly touch.

"That's rare in the Federation today, and I don't mean just among Starfleet personnel. It's something I can appreciate. Most people, it seems, have grown so . . . well mechanical. You know.

"Anyway, I do appreciate it. And I think it's that sort of quality that could, well . . . what I'm trying to say is that I'd like to thank you." Balancing awkwardly on one foot, he commenced to reach down and remove his left boot. Chapel watched this operation uncertainly.

"Thank me . . . with a boot?"

"No, no, my dear. With this." And while she stared he touched a hidden button at the back of the boot. A tiny spring sprang, and the heel clicked aside, revealing a small hollow compartment. It yielded an oblong, multicolored crystal that seemed to pulse with inner light—a neat cross between clear quartz and opal. A thick oily liquid rocked back and forth inside the transparent silicate.

Chapel found herself staring. "What is it?"

"My love potion." That brought her head up. "No, no," he said hastily. "It's not an illusion, not trickery, my dear Nurse Chapel. This is for real. Inside the crystal," and he tapped the specimen with a fingernail, "lies the power to create love . . . in another."

Chapel took a wary step backward. "Oh no you don't, Harry Mudd. I've heard about your potions. I don't believe you." She

spun on her heel and started to leave. Mudd reached out, hurried down the short length of the cell with both hands pressed against the force field.

"But if it did," he implored, his voice rising desperately, "think about it, darlin'—Mr. Spock, in love with you. *Really* in love with you."

Arex looked back from his position at the navigation console to catch first Spock's eye, then Kirk's. "Something rather interesting here, sir."

The *Enterprise* was proceeding at high speed toward distant Darius on a normal exploration course. Now Arex started to slow . . . in case.

"Uncharted star system ahead."

"Put it on the screen, Mr. Arex." The latter flicked a switch. Instantly a tiny, far-off star system became visible on the main screen. An unspectacular blue-white sun boiled in its center.

"Increase magnification, Mr. Arex."

"Yes, sir." Arex did things with three controls at once. The picture leaped into clearer focus. Then he adjusted other dials, and the rest of the bridge saw the main object of interest—the blue-white's companion.

It was smaller, reddish-orange in color. Spock had been studying nonvisual information via the library computer's hooded viewer. Now he looked up and back at them.

"A standard binary system, Captain; but it appears to hold at least one Class-M planet. I think this is rare enough to warrant investigation." Kirk pondered a moment, then agreed.

"Yes, it is. All right, set us an orbit, Mr. Arex." The navigator began making requests of the incredibly complex piloting system. Kirk stared at the viewscreen as they began to edge into the double-star family.

The growing blue-white sun seemed to throb with light, pulse and sparkle, sparkle and flame and . . .

. . .Sparkle hypnotically as Mudd twirled the crystal, back and forth and around and back in his hands like a top on a string.

Nurse Chapel stared at it, fascinated, entranced. She also held a hand phaser aimed squarely at Harry's midsection.

"If it did work," she said slowly, "which is quite absurd, would it . . .?"

"It's so simple, my dear. Nothing to it. Yes, it would."

"How does it work—theoretically, I mean."

"Nothing easier and less obvious," Mudd continued smoothly, still twirling, spinning, and shifting the crystal. "You merely crush the crystal and allow the liquid a second or two to sink into your skin. The hands are best. Then simply touch another person—*the* other person."

"And it creates love? Mudd, that's ridiculous."

"Isn't all love ridiculous?" he argued philosophically. "But you are wrong, darlin'—the crystals are infallible. One touch from a liquid-kissed hand evokes undying friendship among men, or women. But between members of the opposite sex, you get love. The real thing, guaranteed." He held the crystal closer to the force-field.

"Harry Mudd's love crystals could generate passion in a block of granite. Now your Mr. Spock—he's something of a block of granite, isn't he?" Mudd tossed the crystal from hand to hand.

"But naturally, you're skeptical." Taking a couple of steps back into the cell, he didn't miss how her gaze followed the crystal as it moved from palm to palm.

"Now you can appreciate a unique bit of chemistry like this, Christine. You're not only a beautiful woman, you're a scientist. Why, you're practically a physician yourself, in every way but on parchment. I urge you, take this love crystal as my gift of gratitude to you. For your medical ministrations and your comforting hands.

"I assure you, it can't harm you. Even Captain Kirk would tell you that. Why don't you ask him?"

"Ask . . .? No . . . no, I don't think that's necessary. I mean, there's no need to bother the Captain with . . ." She stopped, flustered, and tried another tack. "It can't harm me? Then what about those people on Sirius IX?"

"Ah, you've heard of that," he commented disappointedly. "No matter. They only became slightly ill. There were no

serious sicknesses. You can check that, too, if you wish. But human biochemistry should react to it most favorably. And Vulcan." He tried to appear disinterested.

"Look on it as an experiment." He extended the hand holding the crystal toward her, pulled it back when the force-field firmly rejected it, and chuckled good-naturedly.

"Sorry—forgot, for a minute."

"Not that I believe any of this rubbish," she muttered, but without meeting his eyes. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to analyze the effects."

"Of course not!" He grinned widely.

She hesitated a last minute, then hefted the phaser tightly and reached for the wall-field control. The force-field vanished. Mudd could tell it was gone because the outline of Chapel no longer rippled.

Smiling, he made a courtly bow, noticing as he did so that the hand holding the phaser never wavered. He extended the crystals, careful not to make any sudden movement.

She took it gingerly, handling it like a fusion bomb. Which, in a sense, it was. Keeping the phaser on Mudd, she held it up to the light. Inside, the liquid refracted light, sending it out in myriad flashes every time the crystal shifted . . .

II

One new image after another flashed across the *Enterprise*'s bridge viewscreen as her automatic cameras and recorders scanned the world below. Panoramas alternated with sequential closeups, building a composite picture of the surface.

Basically it was a dry world, a desert planet. Seemingly endless plains of fine sand, deep as oceans in spots, were interrupted only by occasional upthrusts of naked, worn, black rock that registered amazing hardness on the ship's sensors. It would have to be, to withstand the gargantuan dust storms that must everlastingly abrade the skin of the uninhabited globe. The ship's tracking computer finally settled on a medium telescopic view of an area somewhere beneath them.

Sunset there, second sunset, with the blue-white sun already down and the reddish binary turning the sand the color of dried blood. Long shadows turned the surface the color of coal behind the few protruding spires.

The *Enterprise* slid inside the orbit of the planet's single, insignificant moon as Kirk activated the log.

"Ship's Log, Stardate 5514.6.

"We have located and made preliminary scan of a hitherto unidentified binary system with one marginally habitable world. Preparations are now underway for first advanced survey. Second advanced survey with actual landing party will probably not be carried out this trip, unless some unexpected new factor dictates in its favor."

And from the look of that dead, motionless surface, Kirk expected nothing in the way of startling developments. He looked up from the log mike.

"Mr. Spock, have you got those preliminary statistics ready?"

"Here, Captain." Kirk joined his first officer at the library computer. A small screen was playing back the initial probe and sensor reports from their first, fast orbit around the

planet's equator. All were neatly correlated and broken down to essential components.

The *Enterprise*'s planetary detection equipment took a world apart, reduced it to a series of figures that were taken into the library computer. There the ship's brain sorted them out, packed them together, and generally translated them into terms a well-educated Starfleet officer could comprehend.

Arex remained at the helm, keeping a close check on their position to insure that their orbit wasn't varying, while M'ress continued her search via communications equipment for any signs of intelligent life. If any such existed in the sandpit below them, they weren't very talkative. So far she'd found nothing, not even a hint of a primitive crystal set

All these bits and pieces linked up with the computer's preliminary evaluations. This was no world to nourish intelligent life.

"Parking orbit holding, Captain," said Arex over a shoulder. "All weapon's systems on defensive standby." Spock had returned to his station and was again studying the computer readouts for the latest information.

"No evidence of even a primitive society, Captain, though there are signs of standard organic forms—a normal dry-planet ecology."

"Reasonable," Kirk murmured idly, staring at the screen. They wouldn't be here terribly long, then. A subsequent expedition could study what little this world had to offer at some future date. He saw no reason to tie up the *Enterprise* in a painstaking study of local flora and fauna.

"Atmosphere at surface, eight hundred millibars," the science officer continued. "Gravity, one point two. Mean temperature—hot, but within Class-M limits. Seasonal fluctuation . . ."

Chapel finally lowered the crystal and returned her attention to Harry Mudd. "I'll let you know the results of my analysis. It'll be thorough, I assure you."

"But the crystal is so sensitive, my dear. However carefully executed, laboratory tests would probably destroy it. Once

broken, it's completely useless. And it's the only one I have left." He smiled, and his tone became urgent.

"Why not try it out the way it's meant to be tried?"

"No," Chapel protested—weakly, he thought. "I don't think I ought . . ."

"Darlin', consider! If it does what I say it does—and it does," he paused significantly, "Spock will be yours forever. And there are no side effects, nothing to show that it wasn't the real thing."

She still hesitated, considering, and finally came to a decision. She nodded and slipped the hand phaser back onto her belt. "I just break the crystal and let the liquid sink into my skin?"

Mudd smiled. "And then touch him."

Chapel raised the crystal once again, staring into its crystalline depths, then she abruptly closed her fist on it. There was a faint, ethereal pop, like the shriek of some miniscule animal as the crystal turned to powder. The oily liquid now covered her palm.

She brought both hands together and rubbed it into them. For good measure she touched a bit of it to her cheeks. Hands and face dried rapidly as the alien substance either sank into her pores or evaporated.

Suddenly she began to sway dizzily, gasping for air, and sank quickly to the floor in a half faint.

"What is it?" she stammered, crouching on her knees and putting both hands to her head. "What's happening?"

Mudd casually stepped over the boundary of the now deactivated force-screen and bent over her. "Nothin' at all, darlin'. A temporary reaction engendered by absorbing the potion. It'll pass right away."

As he spoke, he gently took the hand phaser from her belt. A moment's further search turned up a thin strip of plastic, which he also pocketed.

Chapel struggled to get to her feet, wobbled, and had to steady herself with a hand on the deck. Her vision was starting to clear.

"Here, darlin' . . . let me give you a hand." He got an arm under hers and lifted, careful not to touch her where the

liquid had been applied.

"I . . . I feel better, I think."

"Of course, didn't I tell you it would be over fast?" She was sweating and shaking her head, still slightly dazed from the strange aftereffects of the drug.

Several things were troubling her, but the fog in her mind seemed to solidify around them rather than clear. Wait a minute . . . one of them, at least, was staring back at her.

"You . . . you should be in the brig, Harry."

"Why so I should," Mudd observed amiably. He took a couple of steps backward until he was standing in the cell again. Chapel hit the force-field activator on the wall. She had to repeat the gesture, missing badly on her first try. Once again Mudd's outline wavered as the distorting field appeared between them. But now she was sure that the waver *was* in the field . . . not in her suddenly cleared mind.

"Why don't you, ah, go find Spock?" he suggested. "The liquid won't stay potent forever, you know."

"Yes," she muttered, then repeated more firmly, "Yes . . . I'll do that." She headed up the corridor.

Mudd paced quietly around in his cell for several minutes, inspecting it from all angles. After he was sure the elevator had started on its way, he reached into a pocket and brought out the hand phaser. A careful adjustment of the aperture to what he estimated would be the minimum necessary setting, and he pressed the trigger.

There was a flash, the beam of energy contacted the minimal force-shield, and it winked out. Mudd grunted his satisfaction and repocketed the phaser. Smiling and whistling happily, he strolled out of the cell and headed for the elevator.

Mudd got off on a little-frequented service deck. He needed a quiet place, a temporary refuge, and the service area seemed the best place to find it.

Walking down the main corridor, he checked room after room. Anything that showed recent signs of visitation, he skipped. Likewise he bypassed any chamber containing material that might be needed for the minute-to-minute operation of the starship.

Finally, he located a near-empty storage room that also possessed an inside lock. This would do for a few hours. He did not expect to be there long.

Sitting down on a canister marked EMERGENCY LUBRICATION SUPPLY and using a big metal crate for a workbench, he took out the thin, flat strip of plastic that he had taken from a pouch at Nurse Chapel's waist. After setting it carefully on the crate, he reached for his boot. The heel clicked aside and yielded up a tiny packet of miniature tools.

Humming to himself and working deftly but quickly, he first erased Nurse Chapel's identifying picture from the Starfleet Identity Card. From the packet he produced a tiny, flat piece of metal about the size of his thumbnail. Slipping it delicately over the now gleaming blank space on the card, he pressed down on it with his thumb. There was a slight click.

When he let off the pressure and slid the tiny square aside, it was his own smiling visage that beamed back up at him from the card.

He put the subminiature tridee duplicator aside and started in on the card with several of the other tiny tools. It would take some time and precision work to erase all Chapel's identification and replace it with his own.

The private quarters of the *Enterprise*'s first officer were much like their tenant—ordered, reasoned, logical. A place for everything and everything in its place. Even the art on the walls reflected a somber regularity of composition much like the man who had purchased it.

Just now that man was working at the large desk which dominated the main room. Spock was running through information being displayed on the readout screen of the desk's own computer annex. The door chime sounded once. He spoke without looking up.

"Come."

Chapel entered, moved to stand next to him. She was carrying a flat microtape cassette in one hand and several other things in her mind. All were intended for Spock.

Trying not to shake, Chapel stood patiently behind Spock while the desk computer hummed and clicked. Finally, he

paused in his work, turned to look up at her.

"Yes, what is it, Nurse?"

"I brought the medical summary for the arrest report, Mr. Spock—the one you asked for?"

"Yes. Thank you, Chapel." He swiveled in his chair, reaching out for the microtape cassette. As he did so, she took a step forward and stumbled awkwardly, falling into his lap.

The startled Spock caught her reflexively. She clutched at him, managing to effect a good deal of physical contact. He looked at her uncertainly.

"Sorry, sir," she apologized, feigning surprise. She paused expectantly, still resting in his arms. Spock sat still, waiting for her to get up. When it became apparent that, for unknown reasons, she wasn't going to move, he rose himself and deposited her on her feet.

"Are you injured, or something, Nurse Chapel?" He couldn't keep the irritation out of his tone, though his expression remained neutral, as always.

"No, I'm fine," she replied, in a voice that indicated she was anything but.

Vulcans have several interesting abilities and senses that humans do not. Sensing sudden rises in blood pressure, however, was not among them.

"Are *you* feeling all right?" she asked hopefully.

"Perfectly normal." He picked the cassette off the desk. "I will append the summary to the report," He waited. When she didn't say thank you, good-bye, or anything else, he shrugged ever so slightly and sat back down at the annex, resuming his work.

Several minutes passed before he noticed that she was still standing behind him. Now he was concerned instead of irritated.

"Was there something else, Nurse?"

Chapel stuttered, one hand moving out to him and hurriedly pulling back. "Wouldn't . . . wouldn't you like me to . . . stay? To help you?"

"I am managing quite easily by myself, Nurse Chapel. For you to stay would be unnecessary, duplicative, and illogical.

Do you not see this?"

"Yes," she whispered. Then her voice turned tight, controlled. "Yes—it'd be damn stupid, in fact." She spun on a heel and marched from the room.

For a minute Spock continued to stare after her, puzzled. Her actions seemed more than normally . . . human. Then he shook his head—no matter how long he lived and worked among humans he would never fully understand them—and returned to his work.

Chapel had some work to do, too. She ignored the casual greetings of fellow crewmembers as she moved down several corridors on her way to the brig, turning over in her mind the various indignities, both verbal and physical, she intended to subject one Harry Mudd to.

Eventually, the single security elevator deposited her in the *Enterprise*'s security corridor. She was speaking before she reached the cell.

"All right now, Harry Mudd. You're in for it, you illegitimate, swindling . . ."

She came abreast of the cell, glared in—and came up short, gaping, No fluttering, apprehensive outline greeted her. Not even a smiling, unwavering one. The force-field barrier was truly off, and the cell itself absolutely empty.

She whirled quickly, thinking perhaps he had somehow managed to slip out and even now was preparing to jump her. Her hand went to her belt for her phaser and clutched nothing but fabric. It shifted, moved up to her head where, she was beginning to think, it might also contact nothing.

The dizzy spell—aftereffects—over quickly. She glanced down at her waist belt as if the hoped-for phaser might somehow respond to visual if not tactile identification. No luck. It wasn't there.

"Oh no," she muttered softly. Then she was running for the elevator.

SHUTTLECRAFT BAY—AUTHORIZED
PERSONNEL ONLY

Mudd examined with pleasure the boldly printed words on the door blocking his way. Then he moved to a small blank screen set in the wall to one side and stood in front of it.

Taking a deep breath, he slipped his newly modified identification card into the slot beneath the screen. If anyone in ship security decided to make a routine check on this shuttle-bay entry it would all be up for him—he didn't look even faintly like Christine Chapel. But the screen only flared once, with white light, as the automatics processed the visitor. There was a brief wait that seemed to Mudd to last only one or two millennia, then a green light winked on beneath the screen. A hum, and the door slid obediently aside. Taking the card out of the slot, Mudd released his breath and hurried through. He paused inside as the door slid shut behind him.

The shuttlecraft hangar was filled with the normal complement of offship Starfleet vehicles. There was a small, superfast scout ship, a heavily armored landing vehicle for worlds with surfaces even more inhospitable than the one rumored to be revolving beneath them, and a hovercraft for those planets with totally antagonistic surfaces, or even none at all.

There were also several light planetary atmosphere fliers, and three compact shuttlecraft themselves. He rubbed his hands together and wished he could let out with a really good bellow of laughter, but someone might have a mike open someplace. So he contented himself with the thought.

Harry Mudd, triumphant again!

He moved at a fast walk toward the waiting vessels.

Unaware that the subject of his arrest report was preparing to invalidate same, Spock had switched off the small desk computer annex and was now concluding that report, dictating into a tiny hand recorder.

". . . and appended hereto is a medical summary and evaluation of the prisoner with statement by Nurse Christine Chapel . . ." He stopped abruptly, drew a deep, startled breath.

Broke into a wide smile. It was fortunate he didn't happen to be gazing into a mirror just then. The shock might have

rendered him unconscious.

He blinked, coughed. The smile vanished as abruptly as it had appeared. Facial muscles unused to the expression were protesting angrily. He cleared his throat again, resumed dictating.

"Uh . . . Nurse . . . Chapel . . . summary appen—"

Again the sharp hesitation, but this time astonished hands fluttered to his upcurved lips. He shook his head violently, then scrambled to his feet, shoving back the chair like a man suddenly possessed—which was exactly the case.

"Christine . . . Chap-el." The last syllable trailed off in a deep, heaving sigh. "Dear, lovely Christine." He sighed again, and his face contorted in horror. He stumbled into the desk, jerked away as though it had transformed itself into a monstrous, four-legged spider.

"Christine—" A sharp pain hit him, as if someone was pounding with steady rhythm on his stomach.

Chapel would have recognized the sensation.

It ought to be fully fueled, ready for an extended mission at any time. Mudd examined the long-range scoutship lovingly. The onboard computer, a miniature of the one that ran the *Enterprise*, could draw on its parent machinery for information. Before anyone caught on, it should be able to give him the ship's current position, accept his fast course setting—for Ilyria, say—and put him instantly out of detector range.

Of course, the *Enterprise* could easily track and overtake him—if anyone noticed his departure, that is. There were steps he could take to insure that no one would. All he needed was five minutes at the scout-ship's nominal but still impressive warp-drive, and he would be over the hill and far away before—

Something hit him hard on the back of the neck. Everything went space-dark for a time, space flecked with an appreciable number of stars . . . though not of solar magnitude.

When his vision cleared, his eyes presented him with an extreme close-up view of the deck. Instinctively one hand went up and back to caress his aching neck. He grimaced

when it touched. A slow heave and he rolled himself over, then almost wished he hadn't. In its own innocent way, the deck was a preferable view.

Christine Chapel, looking very unlike an angel of mercy at the moment, reached down and scooped up the hand phaser that had fallen from Harry's belt. She pointed it at an indelicate portion of his anatomy.

"I've come to collect on your guarantee, Mr. Mudd."

So close—he'd come so close! He grumbled in frustration as he climbed to his feet.

No one on the bridge happened to be scanning the shuttle bay, so Kirk, Arex, M'ress, and Scott continued to be unaware of the play being acted out below.

McCoy was at Spock's vacant library computer station, indulging himself in some minor research of a nonmedical nature. Everyone else was at his station—calm, relaxed. No one glanced up right away when the elevator doors slid back, and Spock stepped onto the bridge.

He moved forward, found himself pausing. He swallowed nervously. But contrary to what surely must be obvious, no one stared at him, no one showed that anything unusual was taking place. No one noticed his confusion.

They noticed the difference in his voice, however. And they all turned at the first words.

"Captain . . ." He hesitated. "Doctor, I believe I require medical attention." McCoy's eyes widened slightly. "I . . . wish to report a number of . . . of very strange . . . emotions."

"What?" The reaction burst simultaneously from Kirk and McCoy. M'ress and Arex just stared.

In the Shuttle Bay, Mudd had regained his feet and was now edging nervously along the wall behind the scout ship, moving toward a nearby complex of bay machinery. Every so often, the grim-faced Chapel would make jabbing motions at him with the phaser as she pursued. Or she would jerk down on it with a finger, just missing the trigger.

Each time she did so, Mudd—who was sweating heavily, and not from the exertion of walking—would give a little start and his high-powered smile would lose a little more voltage.

"Ah, you are implying, darlin', that the potion wasn't completely successful?" Chapel laughed harshly.

"That depends on the point of view, I suppose. Oh, it was beautiful, Harry. I made a thorough fool of myself. I'm sure you're sorry you missed it. But don't worry—what I'm going to do to you will be even funnier." Somehow, to Mudd, the promise seemed lacking in humor.

"But you know how cold Vulcans are," he reminded quickly. "Possibly," and he shook a finger at her as she jabbed with the phaser again, "the reaction is slightly delayed, the potion may need a few more minutes to take effect. After all, with such a reluctant subject as Spock . . ."

She shook her head sadly. "And I had such hopes. But you're the same foul-mouthed fraud you've always been, Harry. I don't know what came over me that would let me believe you, even for a moment. After all the people you've swindled—" Once again the muzzle of the phaser came up.

"Now, nobody's perfect," Mudd hurried to remind her. "And I fell in with bad companions at an early age. Leave us not act rashly, my dear. No need to do something now for which we'll be sorry later."

"Oh, don't worry, Harry. I won't be—I won't be." He started to tremble, and she clucked her tongue in disgust "Don't panic, you sniveling coward."

"I can't help it—that is a habit that seems to affect all us sniveling cowards."

"Harry, this phaser's only set on stun. And I think we've gone about far enough." They had backed right into the complex of machinery. There was an intercom screen nearby for the use of any technicians who might be working on the complex. It was time to end the game.

"Activate the intercom, Harry."

"Now wait a minute, luv," he cautioned brightly, a suggestive cloud appearing in his head. "I have a thought—"

He continued to move backward along the wall, ever deeper into the complex. There was a printed legend on the towering

tank he was backing up to.

AIR REGENERATION AND DISTRIBUTION

He reached into his pocket, jerked his arm, and produced a ripping sound. Christine looked at him curiously. When he withdrew his hand, he held several fine large love crystals, taken from the lining of his pants.

"Try another. I promise you, they'll work. Spock will be so in love with you he'll—"

"Stop it!" she yelled angrily, waving the phaser.

As soon as the compact weapon was no longer pointed at him, Mudd jumped to one side and threw the crystals, whooping and diving at her. The awkwardly thrown handful soared high, to shatter well overhead near an open grid.

Taken by surprise by his war-yell and charge, Christine stumbled backward, firing awkwardly and bumping against the alarm button set under the intercom screen. The phaser blast missed; the wide beam streaking over the lunging trader's shoulder to scorch the metal tower behind him.

Somewhere a siren screamed.

Neither of them, of course, bothered to look upward—they were otherwise occupied—upward, to where the powdered crystal and evaporating liquid were sucked efficiently into the grid by hidden fans.

Harry Mudd was not a small man. He slammed into Chapel hard, his shoulder striking the arm with the phaser. The arm jerked up and back, the phaser discharged again, and the stun-beam caught her in the throat. She sagged instantly into his reluctant arms.

"By the sacred thumbs of Hnisto!" He shifted his feet, lifted her upright. "Sorry Christine, darlin'—but I'm afraid I'm going to need a hostage now. Why couldn't you have let me leave quietly, without going and alerting the whole ship?"

At the same time, he was looking around the bay, toward the scoutship again, considering furiously. With the alarm ringing, but not pinpointed, the brig would be one of the first places automatically checked. The scout looked fast, but without his five-minute lead it would never outrun or outmaneuver the *Enterprise*.

But there was a planet beneath them. Often, a finite world proved a better hiding place than infinite space. But not the scoutcraft, no . . . he headed toward the armored landing vehicle, settling the inert Christine over one shoulder. They'd have a hard time prying him out of *that*.

Spock's confession of deep troubles and subsequent expressions of shock and surprise were interrupted by the alarm. A multitude of questions forgotten, everyone rushed to emergency stations. M'ress cut off the squalling alarm. Arex checked the security panels and reported back.

"It's not a damage alarm, sir. No sign of hostile craft in the immediate vicinity—here it is. Internal security—shuttlecraft bay."

"Give us some visual, Mr. Arex," instructed Kirk calmly. The navigator activated a switch, and everyone looked to the left as a small viewscreen set over the library-science station lit up. It showed the shuttlecraft bay, the ships within, but no sign of anything worthy of an alarm.

"Pan it," Kirk said curtly. The camera began to move. "Hold it, Mr. Arex." Two figures had come into view, one apparently carrying the others unmoving form.

Everyone recognized Mudd's portly shape instantly, but the identity of his limp burden remained indistinct until the head lolled loosely backward.

"Mudd!" Spock shouted passionately. "And he has Christine. She's in danger . . . my belov—" His eyes suddenly widened in horror, and both eyebrows tried to crawl up his forehead and hide in his hair.

"Interesting . . . reactions . . ." he mumbled.

McCoy's jaw opened much wider than normal, but for a change, nothing came forth. Engineer Scott's hand slipped and nearly reversed the *Enterprise*'s artificial gravity before he caught himself. M'ress murmured a meow of puzzlement, while Arex let out a long, low whistle.

"Close Shuttle Bay doors," Kirk finally managed to stammer, noticing that the giant panels in the bay were parting. Arex worked at his controls, turned back worriedly.

"Negative, Captain. Mudd has engaged the landing engines on the armored lander. Shuttle Bay doors will not close while a craft is exiting."

Of course they wouldn't. Spock's outburst and the subsequent shock had delayed his reactions a few seconds too long. The emergency override was designed to prevent the massive doors from accidentally closing on a departing ship once they were engaged.

"Mudd's decided he's got a better chance by going planetside, then," Kirk observed. "He can't make enough speed to lose us, so he's going to try and hide until we get bored and go away. Then he'll make for the nearest inhabited world . . . slowly, but he'll get there. And we can't wait here forever to find him."

"We can't wait at all," came the yell from the library computer station. "Not while he's got my Christine!

"We must go after them, Captain." Spock was haranguing Kirk. "I'll lead a landing party."

McCoy moved toward the library computer station, his gaze never leaving the science officer. "Spock, you're obviously not yourself—maybe a little rest."

"Captain," he said, with an uncharacteristically angry glance at McCoy, "I insist on going." His eyes went to the viewscreen, which showed only the vague, rust-red surface of the planet below.

"Christine . . . Christine Chapel. I can't stand the thought of any danger to her, to the woman I love."

If there had been surprise and shock on the bridge before, everyone now registered a state of total stupefaction. All attention focused on the commanding figure of Spock.

"Love?" a gawking Kirk managed to blurt

"Spock?" McCoy managed to get a great deal into the mere mention of the first officer's name.

Seemingly unaware of the astounded reactions he had provoked, the first officer of the *Enterprise* smiled, a distant dreamy smile that on anyone else would have seemed charming—but on him gave hints of the most nefarious possibilities.

"Yes, I want to protect her. I must hold her in my arms." A cloud seemed to fall across his face, and he halted in mid-sentence as if aghast at what he'd been saying. For a moment his expression tightened and he was the old Spock.

But only for a moment. Then he slumped into another smile. Kirk stared at him, worried.

"Ordinarily I wouldn't consider an immediate pursuit . . . not until our sensors have locked Mudd in. We might even be able to pull him back via transporter. But if you absolutely insist on going down there yourself . . ."

"I do."

"Then I'll transport down with you," Kirk finished, with a sigh.

"Excellent. We have no time to waste, Captain." He spun and moved for the elevator. Kirk left the command chair and started to follow, but McCoy intercepted him.

"Jim . . . do you think this is wise? In his present, unhealthy condition?"

"I wouldn't say it was so unhealthy, Bones. Unusual for Spock, certainly, but unhealthy . . .? I don't know."

"Well I do, Jim. It's a sign of abnormality—completely unnatural for him. Love among Vulcans is more, well, more constrained than this."

"All right," Kirk nodded in agreement. "I'll go along with that. *You* try and stop him."

McCoy started to reply, found he didn't have one. "I see what you mean."

"It's better we don't try to restrain him—and I'll be with him." He turned. "Mr. Scott, you're in command till I return."

"Aye, sir." The chief engineer moved to the command chair as Kirk and McCoy exited in pursuit of Spock.

Astonished silence lingered on the bridge following the departure of the three senior officers.

"Spock . . ." Scott finally muttered. "Spock . . . in love? What do you suppose could have caused a thing like that?"

"I can't begin to imagine," murmured M'ress. She was about to offer additional comment when something faint and aromatic crossed her nostrils. She sniffed. There was a faint

hissing sound that accompanied the strange odor. No one else noticed it, none of them being as sensitive as M'ress. And even she failed to detect the slight vapor, nearly invisible, puffing from one of the air vents.

Now the smell was strong enough for Scott to notice, too. He took a deep, curious whiff . . . and let his face relax in a broad, easy smile. "In . . . love."

M'ress shook her head, the ruff on the back of her neck bristling slightly. Then she began to purr softly at nothing in particular. In fact, the attitude of everyone left on the bridge appeared to grow . . . contented.

Spock was waiting for them in the corridor. "Please, Captain. We cannot spare time for dawdling."

McCoy made a last plea. "I wish you'd let me run some tests on you first, Spock. You're not well."

"On the contrary, Doctor, I've never felt quite so alive in my life. Captain?" Kirk shrugged, and the two officers headed for the transporter room. McCoy had been intercepted by a yeoman from security and remained behind engaged in deep discussion with her.

Spock and Kirk entered the transporter room together. Chief Kyle glanced up easily at their arrival, did a double take at the wild look in Spock's eyes.

Kirk moved quickly to him. "Captain, I—" Kyle broke off, continuing to stare at the nervously pacing first officer. He whispered, "What's with Mr.—"

"No time for explanations now, Chief. I'll tell you later . . . I hope. Have you been tracking the lander that left just a few minutes ago?"

"Yes, sir. Standard emergency procedure, but . . .?"

"Where are they now?"

"Close to touch-down—right near the surface, I'd guess."

"Okay, put Mr. Spock and myself down next to it."

"As you wish, sir." Kyle quieted, engaged in keeping close track of the landing craft while Spock continued his pacing. If they could set down just as Mudd was making up his mind which way to jump . . .

Finally, unable to stand it any longer, Spock walked over to look across the transporter console at Kyle. "If he's harmed one hair on her beautiful, sensitive head—"

If the first officer's intention was to spur the transporter chief to further effort, it had the opposite effect. Kyle's hands fluttered weakly over the controls as he stared at the first with an expression of amazement.

"Mr. Spock, I . . ."

But Spock had whirled and stalked into the transporter alcove. He was waiting impatiently on one of the disks. It was several seconds before Kyle could recover from the brief, if devastating, verbal onslaught and resume tracking the landing craft. And he still had set-down coordinates to compute.

He wanted to question Kirk further, but was interrupted by the soft closing of portal as McCoy joined them.

"What is it, Bones?" the Captain asked.

"A search party found this in the shuttlecraft bay. One of the yeomen thought a chemical analysis might be in order, so she brought it to me. It wasn't necessary."

He held out his open hand. A familiar glittering shape rested there. Kirk took it, held it up to the overhead light and inspected it closely. As he was doing so, his gaze passed over to the waiting, impatient Spock.

"One of Harry Mudd's so-called love crystals, broken." And understanding suddenly dawned.

"Jim, one of the party also found traces of pulverized crystal near one of the recirculation grids. I'd guess from the amount of residue that one or more of these things was broken against it. Nothing's happened so far, but I'm going to have the purification system purged, anyway.

"Good idea, Bones. That should handle any latent effects."

"I hope so, Jim. I passed several of the crew in the corridors, and some of them are looking mighty strange."

"For Vulcan's sake," came Spock's pleading voice, "let us hurry, Captain."

"Easy, Spock," Kirk replied soothingly. "We can't go anywhere till we know where Mudd has set down." His stare lingered a moment on the troubled first officer before returning to McCoy.

"Check it out, Bones. And send me an immediate report if it looks like there might be trouble." McCoy nodded and left the room. Kirk moved to step into the transporter alcove, taking a disk next to Spock.

The same landing coordinates Kyle was computing were being studied on the bridge. Lt. M'ress had taken over Spock's library station, and Scott was standing next to her. She was staring into the hooded viewer.

"Sensors indicate Mudd has landed on the surface." She depressed a couple of levers in combination. "Confirming coordinates sent to transporter room."

Scott laughed quietly. "And the captain's in transports about it—together with our ever-lovin' Mr. Spock." He chuckled again. M'ress found herself laughing with him, an irregular mewing sound.

She stood up, turned away from the hooded viewer, and reached out with one paw. Tiny clipped claws sprouted silently. Hesitantly, then with more conviction, she ran the sharp hooks along his neck and shoulders.

"It's . . . funny. I hadn't rrealized it beforre, but you'rre funny. And verry attractive forr a human, Mr. Scott." He laughed again and smiled warmly back at her.

"Hey, easy, lass . . . that tickles."

She purred and moved a little closer . . .

III

It was day on the new world. Both suns were up, and the light beat at the sand like a hammer. A towering cliff of sheer, jet-black rock rose out of the dunes. It was perhaps twenty meters high, slightly rounded and shining.

Twin shadows lanced out in different directions. Another weird double shadow formed, shifting and sharp against the ground, as the heavy landing craft made its gentle touch-down. It squatted silently in the dead air like a great ugly beetle.

All was still; nothing moved for several long minutes. Then a small dark cavity appeared in one side of the beetle and two tiny figures exited. They were immediately joined by four shadows.

"They'll find you soon enough, my little poppin," said Mudd. The temperature, thanks to the planet's distance from the twin suns, was not unbearable, and the atmosphere cut down enough on the radiation so that anyone caught unprotected in the sun would not find himself neatly toasted before lunch. But without shelter, a human would tan mighty fast on this world.

"You'll be quite safe," he insisted, "and by the time you are rescued I'll be long gone."

"Gone where," Chapel asked sardonically, looking around. "This planet's one big desert, deserted."

"There's always an opportunity for an ingenious man," he told her thoughtfully. "Better free on a desert than safe in a brig. Once, on Omega VII, I turned a handsome profit selling the natives their own oceans."

Nurse Chapel could not decide whether this typically outrageous claim was partly truthful or pure fabrication. Certainly it was no more absurd than her present situation.

"Well if you're thinking of selling any locals these deserts, you'd better abandon it, Harry. We've detected no traces of intelligent life here."

"Then you can relax, eh?" Mudd said expansively, "since that means there's no danger."

There was a concerned note in her voice. "I said no *intelligent* life. We did, I hear, find traces of nonsentient organic forms."

Mudd grunted. "It hardly looks like you'll be overwhelmed in the short time you'll be waiting for pickup, darlin'," He gestured around them and for the first time they both took a long look at their place of planetfall.

The landscape that greeted this survey had not been designed to please human desires. There were occasional clusters of towering black stone, some scrubby vegetation thrown in as an afterthought by an uncaring nature—and oceans, oceans of sand. Brown sand, reddish sand, yellow and black sand. There was nothing else.

She turned back to him. "You're *not* leaving me alone in this?"

"Don't worry, darlin'. We'll get you set up first class. No, don't bother to thank me."

"I hadn't planned on it," she replied, eyeing the phaser which Mudd held with seeming unconcern in one hand. If she could trip him and made a grab for it before they went back inside the lander . . .

Mudd wasn't quite *that* relaxed, however. "Ah, ah . . . naughty thoughts, Christine." He waved a warning finger at her and took a wary step backward, then gestured up the ramp and made a little bow.

She sighed, resigned. It appeared that she was going to be the ignominious subject of a rescue from the *Enterprise*, while Mudd made good his escape. And he might, at that.

If Mudd could find a deep cave, he could hide the lander. And with its power turned off, the tiny block of metal would be practically invisible to the *Enterprise*'s sensors. His only problem then would be confusing the ship's life sensors, and Chapel did not doubt that someone as resourceful as Harry Mudd would find a way to manage that.

This escapade surely would not look good on her record.

Mudd left the hatch door open behind them, enjoying the influx of fresh air after days in space. He wasn't worried about

Chapel escaping—where would she escape to?

The first low ridge of black rocks lay about a half a kilometer from the landing craft. If either of them had been looking in that direction just now, they might have noticed a faint movement about two-thirds of the way up the front of the ridge.

Surely it was a trick of the light from the double suns. Or perhaps a slight rockfall. But the rippled black surface moved again. It wasn't a trick of light, nor a fall of small rocks, but rather a wholly different and unbelievable phenomenon. Part of the black "rock" slid upward, like a massive door. The smooth, glassy surface revealed beneath exhibited a moisture that had nothing to do with hidden springs. The surface moved again, downward, as the massive eye inclined to stare at the tiny landing craft.

"I've got 'em pinned, Captain. No mistake, they've set down. And according to sensors Mudd's staying in place for a few minutes, anyway. His engines are off." Kyle was too busy to notice the slight fragrant aroma that had drifted into the room, and his voice covered the hiss from an overhead ventilation grid.

"Ready to transport down."

"Ready," both Kirk and Spock acknowledged. A high, musical whine filled the transporter chamber. Two chromatic columns of light appropriated the figures of the two officers as Kyle moved levers upward.

One of the figures seemed to sniff uncertainly at the air just before he was effectively dematerialized. Kyle brought the levers down sharply, and the electronic cadence vanished.

A different kind of music had taken over the bridge. Part of it could be traced to Arex, whose present navigational concerns were restricted to plucking and strumming the proper notes on an odd, double-stringed guitar. It wasn't an easy instrument to play, even for him, but without three hands it would have been all but impossible.

He was managing, however, singing a sweet wordless chant in time to the music. In the center of the floor, several of the younger officers were dancing lightly to the unusual rhythm,

taking no notice of its alienness. And someone had broken out an adequate supply of intoxicants. It was developing into quite a party—even better, some insisted, than their recent private reveries on the Omicron pleasure world.

M'ress was leaning over the communications console while Scott, humming his own highland tune, massaged her shoulders. Her steady purring broke only once, when the chief accidentally rubbed her fur the wrong way. Otherwise, she was the picture of contentment.

Arex's wordless chant spiraled to a coda. It drew a smattering of applause from some of the listeners, who proceeded on to other activities.

Somewhere, in the back of the navigator's mind, a nonmusical note of insistence was howling for attention. Irritated, he glanced around the bridge, hoping something would key his memory. Oh yes, that was it.

"By the way," he murmured, speaking to the room in general, "is anybody keeping a check on the captain and Mr. Spock?"

"Surre, Arrex, Surre," purred M'ress. "See?" She flicked a hand at a screen control indifferently, once, twice, hitting the activating switch on the third try. Scott took no notice of this highly arbitrary activity, continued to rub her shoulders and back. How soft the communications officer was! Scott did not seem concerned in the slightest that this was not an appropriate thought for a ship's chief engineer to have in regard to his back-up communications officer.

The small communications viewscreen lit up, but M'ress did not notice that. She was not bothering to look at it, seemingly having already forgotten why she turned it on. Arex didn't remind her. He'd good-naturedly responded to a request for another song. No one bothered to comment that the interference pattern which was all that showed on the screen, was not even in focus.

Neither was Arex's melody, but for some reason no one seemed to care about that, either. Mostly because the majority of the music was in their minds.

The solidifying transporter effect was more brilliant than usual under the cross-light of the twin suns as the two starship officers materialized within walking distance of the armored landing craft.

Extraordinarily, the usually exacting Chief Kyle had relaxed his control, because both men set down at a slant. Kirk adjusted quickly, righting himself. But Spock, in a gesture wholly out of character, did not. The first officer nearly fell over, and Kirk had to reach out to steady him. Spock looked back at the Captain and smiled warmly.

"Thanks, Jim. I've never done that before. It's good to have a friend like you." Kirk's expression started to twist up, but melted into an odd, warm smile.

"Strange, that's the way I feel about you, too. In fact . . ." his smile grew broader, and he put a friendly arm around the first officer's shoulders ". . . my dear friend, Spock. Come on, let's go get Mudd and Christine." They started off down the slight slope in the direction of the lander. Neither man paid any attention to the slight shift in the surface of the ebony cliff behind them as the glistening medallion of the colossal eye opened again.

Mudd, preparing to unload some basic survival equipment for Chapel, had just stepped out of the lander onto the descending ramp. He did not even have a chance to notice the approaching officers before the ground began to shake.

Sand rattled around the base of the heavy vessel. The startled trader whirled. As he did so, Chapel shot past him before he could even think to get the phaser out or yell, or do anything else. She had spotted Kirk and Spock. But now she saw something else, and she screamed.

Ahead, black rock erupted from the earth, heaving skyward on six stumplike legs. Each was as big around as a starship warp-engine. Sand continued to drift down from little clefts and protuberances. Overall, the leviathan was faintly reptilian in appearance. However, this was just a human attempt to categorize, to make something utterly alien familiar. Actually, the beast resembled nothing that could be related to the fauna of Earth.

Its eye was wide open now, staring down at them with massive, blank malevolence.

Kirk and Spock heard Chapel scream, noticed her frantic gestures and turned. At the same time there was a loud sucking noise, and they saw the creature lift itself out of the sand. They ran to the lander.

There was no time for greetings, and they immediately ran from the craft as the monstrosity behind them swung around on pillarlike forelegs. Mudd, completely stunned by the approaching apparition, was stumbling around on the landing ramp.

A shadow crept over the lander as a three-taloned cloud-paw blotted out the suns. The change in illumination was enough to shock Mudd into action. He ran down the ramp and hurried to catch up with Chapel and the others. Darkness fell just behind him as the paw began to lower. It seemed to descend in slow motion. He heard a flat, ugly crunching sound as hundreds of tons of living mountain ground the landing craft into the sand. The paw, still moving with seemingly contrived slowness, slid under the pulverized metal.

The monster lifted the flattened lander up, up. It looked like a broken toy in the shuttlecraft-sized paw. One eye examined it cursorily, then the paw shook, and the remnant of the lander flew free. It smashed down near the terrified humans, and that action seemed to galvanize the mountain-thing into motion once more.

Like a starship coming about, the monster turned, revealing as it did not one but three eyes, spaced evenly around the irregular, massive head. It had no recognizable neck—just the titan body and its six herculean legs. A mouth opened, circular and irislike, to show a bottomless pit lined with stalactites and stalagmites of writhing, twisting cilia.

A shrill whistling sound echoed from that awesome maw, like wind from a deep cave.

Spock, Kirk, and Chapel had slowed slightly, and Mudd caught up to them. Hand shaking wildly, the trader now raised his phaser toward the more threatening arrival. He tried to steady it by grabbing the wrist with his free hand, but that only made the phaser shake twice as hard.

Ignoring the ineffectual Mudd, Kirk and Spock moved slightly apart, taking out their own weapons.

"Aim for the head!" Kirk instructed, more for Mudd's benefit than for the calm Spock. Two beams of red light shot upward, converged on the massive, eye-studded bluff looming overhead. To Chapel they looked impossibly tiny, threadlike, to have much effect on that mountainous form. But if nothing else, the results proved conclusively that the creature was made of flesh and not unfeeling stone.

There was a tremendous whistling sound, a hurricanelike scream, and the beast exploded even further out of the sand. A long tentacular shape, something like a branching taproot, ripped out of the soil with an audible sucking noise. The creature snapped at itself where the beams had made contact, triple eyes blinking in dull pain.

Two of the gigantic legs collapsed, and the thing half fell to the ground, making the earth quake. The four humans were tossed about like corn in a popper.

The monster recovered as quickly as it had reacted, struggling back up onto all six legs. The great head, like the bow of a ship, turned ponderously, searching once again for its mote-sized tormentors. It had almost located the four bipedal specks sprawled helplessly on the dark sand when there was a rumbling from nearby, like distant thunder.

Suddenly the triorbed skull swung back in the opposite direction. A volcanic upheaval of sand was in progress behind it. Another black head appeared from the earth, followed by an equally gargantuan form, as a second monster lifted toward the blue-white sun. Once clear, it immediately started for the other.

The four spectators were alternately fascinated and fearful. Spock was the first to break free of the hypnotic thrall the incipient conflict had created. He grabbed the hypnotized Christine. That action shocked her as much as the dual appearance of the mountain-sized aliens. But still greater surprises were to come.

"Darling!" Spock gasped, "are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Mr. Spo—" She suddenly felt faint. "D . . . darling?

Mudd's expression was more easily interpreted. "Kirk, get us out of this!"

"Calm down, Harry," Kirk answered with an assurance he didn't feel. He freed his communicator, shook some clinging sand free, and flipped it open. As long as the monsters were occupied with one another, the humans were in no danger despite their proximity to them. A few seconds and they would be back on the ship.

"Transporter room—Captain speaking. Beam us up, Kyle, and show some speed."

On board the *Enterprise*, his voice sounded clearly over the open transporter room pickup. But it was lost in the music pouring gaily through the intership intercom.

Transporter Chief Kyle and an attractive young yeoman named Marion were dancing to the music. Kyle heard, or thought he heard, Kirk's voice, punctuated by the insistent clamor of the intercom alarm buzzer. But the strident sound blended easily, naturally, into the music.

Kyle held Yeoman Marion a little closer, smiling down at her. There was country fiddling and a Bruch concerto mixed somehow into the music—and something more. She returned his smile lovingly.

"No response," Kirk muttered, a little worriedly. The communicators were tough little instruments, well-sealed. It was virtually impossible for anything like sand to get inside. Kirk shook it, an age-old gesture of semimagic, and tried again.

"Chief Kyle, this is an emergency! Beam up!"

Not a hum of recognition in answer, nothing to show that the *Enterprise* still existed in this universe.

"What's going on up there!" Then he noticed that no one down here was paying him much attention, either.

Chapel appeared to have regained control of herself—and lost it in the process. The contradiction was implied, but not real. She was clinging to Spock and gazing up at him with a thoroughly unprofessional expression.

Mudd was pointing in the direction of the ruined landing craft and making indecipherable gobbling sounds. He was communicating, nonetheless.

After eyeing each other uncertainly for several long moments, the two moving mountains had turned slowly until

both were once again facing the tiny aliens.

"Don't be upset with Chief Kyle, Jim," said Spock airily. "It takes a moment or two to lock in coordinates. It doesn't matter." He looked down at Chapel reassuringly. "Nothing matters, now that you're safe, Christine."

"Yes—oh yes. How wonderful."

"They're coming for us again!" Mudd stammered, backing up and making shoving gestures in the direction of the black monsters—gestures that were instinctive more than anything else.

The two giants were indeed moving toward them again, one ponderous step at a time. Kirk searched the landscape around them desperately. A thick cluster of towering yellow-brown knife-blades—the still standing core of some long-dead, long-eroded volcano—thrust out of the sand not too far behind them.

The weathered rock—if indeed it was rock, and not another monster—had been shattered in the past by some powerful convulsion that slivered it with deep cracks and crevices. There seemed to be a number of places to hide in. Anything was better than standing on the flat sand, waiting for a mountainous paw to flatten them.

"Over there!" Kirk yelled, starting toward the volcanic plug. Spock helped Chapel along while Mudd brought up the rear.

They made rapid progress over the sand, which fortunately grew firmer the nearer they came. And their approach provoked no display of eyes, legs, mouth, or any other organic appurtenances. Kirk continued to rail at the silent communicator.

"Emergency beam up—*Enterprise*, come in!" He looked back over a shoulder. The first thing he saw was that Spock and Chapel were running while tightly locked together. Absurdity combined with apprehension to spark bitter comment.

"Can't you take your hands off her, even now?"

"This is my affair, Captain," Spock panted, maintaining his dignity.

Chapel listened to this interplay without really understanding what was happening, or why. "Please, I think

we should get a few things straight . . ."

But she found it hard to talk while running. They hurried into a deep crevice filled with sand, stumbling back down arrow-straight depths that showed no signs of narrowing. They had been lucky—their first choice of a refuge was good and deep.

"Jim," Spock began, and then a switch was thrown in his mind and he paused in confusion. "No . . . no . . . Captain." He pronounced the title carefully,—emphasizing it—but then half-smiled again.

"We're both reacting abnormally. Look at me. It's the potion. The love drug . . . insidious. It—" From behind them a loud voice interrupted incredulously.

"The love potion . . . insidious?" Mudd gaped at them. Kirk and Spock ignored the trader.

Spock was fighting with himself. "Once . . . once you recognize its effects for what they are, you're able to resist it somewhat, as I am doing now."

"It worked," Mudd mumbled inanely, his facial expression one of dazed comprehension. "Oh my Great Aunt Anabella, bless her departed black-hearted soul, it worked!" He slumped dejectedly to the sand.

"And I was going to sell the few crystals I had left to those lump-headed miners for a miserable three hundred credits apiece." Both hands beat at the sides of his head.

"You mean you thought all along they were phony?" a puzzled Kirk asked, his attention momentarily drawn away from the communicator.

Mudd looked across at him, his voice a pitying moan. "Did you think I'd believe a crazy old Sirius medicine man? Of course I thought they were phony. Especially after all they did on Ilyria was make people sick." He was wallowing in self-misery.

"Old and crazy—wouldn't even say where the benighted things came from. I knew they could produce a temporary pleasant effect, and a little dizziness—but love?" He beseeched the heavens. "It's not fair, I tell you, it's not fair!"

The con-man conned—Kirk had to grin. He peered down the cleft. Neither of the creatures was in view. They had not

seemed particularly intelligent, and their reaction time was slow, very slow. If only they didn't accidentally pass this way. Perhaps it would seem to them that the fast-moving tiny animals—themselves—had simply disappeared. If their memories were commensurate with their reactions, the two living mountains might go back to being pieces of scenery again.

"Cheer up, Harry. You wouldn't have known what to do with any honest money anyway." Mudd was too depressed to offer a rejoinder. He felt sick.

Perhaps the scene in the *Enterprise*'s Sick Bay might have cheered him up. Light music played over the intercom. Some of the medical personnel present were dancing close together. Others were playing idly with the medical computers.

A couple of the more adventurous were doing nonregulation things with the body-function machinery that slid over the hospital tables.

The nominal head of this sybaritic setting was Dr. McCoy. At the moment he had one arm companionably around Nurse Mayer.

"Now Lyra, did I ever tell you about the time I saved Captain Kirk's life? And Commander Spock's?" Nurse Mayer shook her head, looking up at him with a mixture of awed admiration and affection. Her normal reaction to such a statement of McCoy's would have been a hard-boiled snort of derision.

"And my dear friend Scotty, too," McCoy continued blithely. "And that pretty little Lieutenant Uhura. Why, I guess I've saved just about everybody on this ship, one time or another." He looked around the room, saw nothing unusual in the highly unmedical activity.

"If the *Enterprise* had a heart, I'd save her, too." He found himself sniffing away a tear, smiled down at his companion. "Let's talk about your heart, my dear Lyra—"

Kirk walked over to Mudd, backed the trader up against one wall. "How long does the effect of the potion last, Harry?"

"I . . . I don't know." Kirk reflected that he was still probably in shock. Not from the sudden appearance of the monsters, but from the revelation that he had probably been involved in an honest deal. "I didn't know it was going to have any lasting effects at all, so I didn't ask."

"Well how long," pressed an exasperated Kirk, "did the 'crazy old medicine man' say it was *supposed* to last?"

"Not long."

"What do you mean, 'not long'? He must have told you something about its effects—whether you thought they were foolish or not."

"Actually—you're hurting my arm, Captain—he was starting to, but I wanted to complete the transaction as smoothly as possible before he discovered the credit slips I paid him with were counterfeit."

"Then how—" but Kirk was interrupted by a startled shout from Chapel. He turned from Mudd, saw her pointing toward the entrance of the cleft.

Both monsters lumbered into view, blocking out much of the light as they moved between the setting suns and the crevice. Their heads, black icebergs, swayed slowly from side to side in searching motions. Then they stopped. The head of the nearest one stared into the cleft, three great glassy eyes pinning the humans under an overpowering, unthinking gaze.

Kirk handed his communicator to Chapel. "Keep trying to contact the *Enterprise*, Nurse." He looked from Mudd to Spock.

"Maybe we can divert them, somehow."

"That is an outstandingly stupid idea, Captain," Spock commented. He stopped, flustered. "I'm sorry, Captain, it's the drug. I simply doubt that we can successfully appeal to their better nature—if they have one. Nor do I think they would respond to having their backs scratched—it would take a landing craft to make an impression. And phaser fire only seems to make them madder."

"I wasn't thinking of anything like that, Spock. There's a terran expression that dates from ancient times, 'make love, not war.' Harry, do you have any of those crystals left?"

"Check his shoes, Captain. They're like his head," Chapel suggested. But it wasn't necessary. Mudd was voluntarily going through his pockets—and he found something. One hand came out, started to open, and then clamped tight. He started to slide away, along the wall.

"No, they're worth a fortune. My friends, dear Christine—" He was appealing to all of them. "I'll share it with you, I'll—"

Kirk reached out easily and clamped a hand around Mudd's wrist, smiling tightly.

"Ah, Captain, you're hurting me again. This archaic resort to crude physical force isn't like you, Captain." Mudd was trying very hard to keep smiling.

"Another second, Harry, and I'll crudely break it. Don't worry. When you're unconscious, you don't feel any pain."

"Since you put it that way, Captain—" His palm opened reluctantly, and Kirk took the three crystals thus revealed. Mudd bit his lower lip as he watched them go. "Perhaps just one, Captain? To encourage my continuing an honest career?"

But Kirk was already moving toward the entrance of the now blocked crevice.

IV

On the bridge, the air was empty of all music. Not having effected actual contact with the love potion, but only inhaled a diluted vapor from it, the rest of the crew was rapidly reverting to normal.

M'ress started to stretch, stopped, and snarled. One paw went to her head, and she rubbed it tiredly. It seemed she'd been at some kind of party.

Scott walked over to her, exhibiting similar signs of an inner pain. "I've got a hangover to rank with the finest," he mumbled loudly. His voice rose to a near shout as he further declared, "And I dinna touch a dram o' that scotch!"

"Not so loud, you idiot!" M'ress pleaded, now putting both hands to her ringing head.

"Idiot, is it? Well, all of a sudden I'm not so crazy about you, either, Lieutenant." Scott glared at her.

The ground-to-ship channel crackled for attention. "Surface party to *Enterprise*—surface to *Enterprise*," came a weary voice barely recognizable as belonging to Head Nurse Christine Chapel. "Emergency beam up . . . repeat, request emergency beam up."

Both officers reacted simultaneously, looking at each other in surprise.

M'ress broke free of it, slapped over a switch, and snarled into the mike. "*Enterprise* here . . . is that you, Nurse Chapel? What's going on?"

Chapel nearly stumbled in her excitement "Captain, I made contact!"

"Marvelous," a grim-faced Kirk replied, from up ahead. "I hope we last long enough to be beamed up."

The first leviathan was nearing the cleft. Any moment now a massive paw might rise up, descend on the rim of their refuge. The rock overhead seemed strong enough to keep even that heavy blow from them, but they were sure to be buried under an avalanche of loosened stone.

"It's seen me," Kirk yelled back to the others, hugging to the side of the cleft. "I need something to draw its attention. Phasers, Spock."

Spock moved to stand in the open, and a trembling Mudd forced himself to follow.

Holding the crystals in his right hand, phaser ready in his left, Kirk dashed out of the crevice.

He ran directly toward the first creature. Eyes the size of shuttle-bay doors inclined slowly to follow him.

Kirk ran to his right now, staying close against the base of the plug. As soon as the great head had turned to the side to follow him, Spock and Mudd fired.

Once again two beams of concentrated energy made contact with the skull. Once more the monster bucked, shrieking. The cavernous mouth opened.

Running down from the shielding stone and toward the living mountain, Kirk arched his arm, throwing the crystals with all his strength. They flew up and disappeared somewhere down that endless dark tunnel.

The mouth shut tight. The head swung back down toward Kirk and stopped. He watched it, paralyzed by those pondlike eyes. It hadn't made anything as recognizable as a swallowing motion—but then they had no idea what the monster's digestive system was like. In any case, there was no point in hesitating. All bets were placed; it was time to declare their hand.

Kirk ran toward the nearest enormous limb and slapped it firmly with both hands, twice. If this failed to work he was likely to die any minute. At least it might give Spock, Chapel, and Mudd a chance to beam up.

"Kyle!" M'ress was shouting into the intership communicator, "Transporter Chief Kyle, acknowledge!"

In the transporter room, Kyle searched frantically for the suddenly elusive intercom controls, finally located them. "Kyle here . . . I think. What's wrong, Lieutenant?"

"Are you utterly incompetent?" M'ress howled, ignoring her own recent lapse in efficiency. "Didn't you hear—the Captain's requesting emergency beam up!"

"Emergency—I've been," a hand went to his forehead. "I've been ill."

"We've all been ill. For Amara's sake, Chief, beam them up!"

"Yes . . . yes," groaned Kyle, his head ringing with M'ress's command. "I'll do anything . . . only please stop shouting." He broke off and began working frantically at the transporter controls.

Kirk stumbled backward. The massive leg he had just touched was lifting skyward, seemingly propelled by a hidden crane. It hung poised there for a moment, then started to descend. He looked in all directions, but there was no place to run, and he was too far out to get back to the cleft.

The cliff side near him now was a solid wall, without even a cubbyhole to squirm into. The paw came down slowly, slowly. He closed his eyes and waited for death.

There was a deep, muffled thump—then nothing. He blinked.

The nearest talon, one of three massive hooks sprouting from the paw, had slammed down just next to him. It moved sideways, knocking him on his back gently.

Kirk looked upward, above the claw, to the looming face. It stared down at him blankly, expressionless and alien. Rolling over carefully, he caught his breath and then threw a handful of sand into the air, letting out a joyful whoop.

Spock, Mudd, and Chapel had moved to the edge of the crevice to watch the drama play itself out. They started to cheer, and Kirk ran jubilantly to join them.

"It worked, by God, it worked!" Mudd seemed to be sniffling and mumbling something about his lost riches, but the others were sharing Kirk's excitement.

They were stunned to silence by a screaming whistle.

They had forgotten about the second monster.

Cilia fluttering around the inside of its mouth, the other monster had turned toward the cleft entrance and was heading for them. Kirk scrambled backward with the others, drawing his phaser. Spock and Mudd lifted theirs a moment later.

Another whistling shriek shattered the dry air. The second beast halted its ponderous attack as a gigantic paw swung

past barely missing it. The first monster had spun around and now blocked the path of the second.

The wave of sand thrown up by the first creature inundated Kirk and the others, knocking them off their feet and burying Spock up to his waist. Mudd lost his phaser and Kirk his. They scrambled to free themselves.

A reverberating tremor followed as the two beast-mountains slammed into each other, multiple legs clawing at sides and face, circular mouths straining for a vacuuming grip on uneven body surfaces.

Kirk nearly fell again as they retreated back into the cleft. A rear leg swung wildly and tore away meters of cliff-face near the top of the crevice. A shower of rock came down, barricading the humans inside the cleft.

The earth shook as the two titans threw blow after blow at one another. Every time one of the multiple-ton paws connected, there was a clap like thunder.

The second beast struck a powerful blow, knocking the first aside, and was battered off its feet in turn. As it tumbled, the gigantic skull crashed against the front of the sheltering cleft and jammed there, cracking free more rock. A monstrous evil eye glared directly at them.

One huge front leg shoved the creature to its feet again. The other lifted and reached inward, straining for the four trapped figures, descending toward four sparkling pillars of rainbow-hued light, finally landing to scoop out a deep pit in the sand where Kirk, Spock, Mudd, and Chapel had stood helplessly only seconds before.

"And then, on Ophiucus VI," Mudd continued, his cheerful form wavering from behind the vision-distorting force-field, "I conned two miners out of a year's supply of dilithium crystals with fake Federation credit vouchers." He grinned in remembrance.

"They weren't too hysterical about that, though, miners are very philosophical types. We might have settled the misunderstanding amicably, if only they hadn't discovered so soon that the Andalusian pleasure slave I'd given them in exchange for the fake vouchers was a pneumatic automaton.

That's when they became rather nonplussed—though that wasn't the exact term they used—and I was forced to bid a hasty adieu to their charming frontier world."

"May I be of help in recording the confession, Nurse Chapel?" Spock inquired helpfully. He had just exited from the elevator, curious to find out how the recording was going. Chapel put a temporary hold on the recorder and looked up at him bitterly.

"You? You'd be the last person I'd choose." Her gaze traveled from the first officer's foot to his head, then turned sharply away. Spock merely raised his eyebrows, then turned his attention over to Mudd.

"A few minutes of love, now to be paid-for with many hours of hatred—the usual way of human emotions, it seems. I do not think your potion would be a very good buy even at half the price, Harry Mudd."

"Ah well, Spock, you know how it is," Mudd replied easily. "So few things in this universe live up to their reputations."

"Except you, Harry. I should say that you live up to yours in a style few other sentients can boast of—or would want to."

"As neat a backhanded compliment as ever I've had, Spock," Mudd applauded. His head cocked questioningly to one side. "Think I'll get rehabilitation therapy again?"

"I would almost guarantee it, Harry Mudd, though I fail to observe any beneficial effects in you of such past treatment."

"No, it doesn't seem to work too well on me, does it?" Mudd agreed. "It's not easy, you know, Spock, when you're born with a name like Mudd. At least I do have, as you say, the virtue of consistency."

"In your case, Harry, it's hardly a virtue."

"Rehabilitation therapy," murmured Chapel, her eyes gleaming. One hand opened and closed rhythmically. She stared through the force-field.

"I think maybe it would do Harry more good if he had a dose of good old-fashioned cruel and unusual punishment instead."

"Now, now, my dear Christine," Mudd said, "is that a proper attitude for a dispenser of healing to have? Besides, I'm an

official Federation prisoner, and as such I'm entitled to a little —"

"Maybe you'd better finish this for me, after all, Mr. Spock," she said, staring at Mudd with a look Florence Nightingale would have found appalling. She handed him the tricorder, clenching both hands nervously behind her back.

"I should think you would be getting used to rehabilitation therapy by now," Spock mused conversationally, his scientific curiosity aroused.

"You never get used to it, Spock, but that doesn't matter. That's not what's really bothering me."

"There is something troubling you more than the prospect of renewed therapy?" Spock noted. "Most interesting."

"You see," Mudd continued, "it's only that I hate to leave you all." He smiled dangerously. "All my loved ones . . ."

Despite the fact that Mudd was declared absolutely off limits to all members of the crew, that his meals were always served up by automatons, and that no one visited him for whatever reason except in twos, Kirk didn't relax until they had entered orbit around Star-fleet sector headquarters at Darius.

They gave him back his own clothes, then—minus the astonishing assortment of miniature devices concealed within the material—turned him over to an escort party made up of Kirk's best security people.

Cheerful to the last, Mudd waved friendly good-byes to them all as he was turned over to ground-based Peaceforcer personnel. He was still waving as they led him through the sliding doors of the Legal Building.

Watching him depart, Kirk couldn't help but wonder if Mudd were not already at work trying to convince his escorts into not only letting him go, but into turning over their identification cards and weapons as well.

If he got a single ranking official into a card game, the planet was lost.

Kirk hoped for at least a moderate layover. But as it developed there was no time to rest and enjoy the pleasures Darius had to offer. Orders were waiting for him as soon as he and the security party beamed back aboard.

"Communication from Starfleet Science Headquarters, Captain," said Sulu as Kirk reentered the bridge. "Confidential. Mr. Spock is waiting for you in your quarters."

"Thank you, Mr. Sulu."

Well, that was fast. Something especially interesting must be up if Spock felt the need of discussing the orders in private.

The first officer of the *Enterprise* was seated at the large central desk in Kirk's rooms. He swiveled to face the Captain as he entered.

"I trust, Captain, that Harry Mudd is safe in custody?"

"I'd feel better if they would give his tongue rehabilitation therapy instead of his mind. One appears to operate independently of the other. But I think we've seen the last of Harcourt Fenton Mudd—I hope.

"I understand from Mr. Sulu that you've kept the new orders secret. By their urgency I gather that they don't allow us time for a rest orbit."

"It would appear not, Captain, though I have only played the first portion of them." He hefted a small microtape cassette. "Here is the communication from Science Center. I think you will find it interesting." He slipped the cassette into the desk play-back slot. Kirk sat down.

A young science officer appeared on the screen in front of them. He was standing alone in a chamber that gave signs of extending above and behind him to considerable distances. The camera pulled back and showed that this was indeed the case. It also identified the particular chamber to Kirk and Spock.

Rising from floor almost to ceiling was a full-scale reproduction of the Megasphere—the gigantic artificial construct which was an exact model of the Milky Way. Distances between the stars, nebulae, black holes, neutron stars, and other objects were to scale—though the stars and other intragalactic objects were not. If so represented, they would have had to have been built so small as to be visible only under a microscope.

All galactic coordinates for starship navigational computers and all scientific referents to galactic structure were drawn

from the Megasphere. Only two originals existed—one on Earth, the other on Vulcan.

New stellar discoveries were constantly being added, a titanic task in itself, as the proper insertion of a newly charted star into the Megasphere was work for specially designed computer controlled microhandlers. As it was, maintaining accuracy within the colossal model was a job involving weeks of preparation merely to design new microhandlers to perform the actual insertion.

Banks of special lights flooded the Megasphere from every angle. The light was picked up, amplified, and thrown back into near darkness by special photosensitive material. Bulbs or any kind of powered light source were too clumsy and too difficult to use. The photosensitive material used would never wear out, never need replacement.

Half a dozen special gravity field generators held the stellar model intact, any one of which could maintain the Megasphere. If for some unforeseeable reason all six failed simultaneously, the work of years would fall to the chamber floor in a shower of tiny glowing pebbles.

The young officer spoke easily, with the manner of a confident lecturer.

"Captain Kirk, Science Officer Spock . . . I am Lieutenant Bell of the Prometheus Science Center. I think you will be pleased to know that the new mission that you have been selected to carry out is of a purely investigative and scientific nature, with no rescue or Peaceforcer functions involved." He smiled pleasantly, and Kirk found himself liking this young man. That, he reminded himself, was exactly why Lieutenant Bell had been chosen to deliver recorded orders.

"But this assignment will require considerable long-range cruising, so we are concerned that you be on your way as soon as possible." Bell had a thin, glowing metal wand with which he turned and pointed into the Megasphere.

"Your approximate route . . ."

THE TERRATIN INCIDENT

(Adapted from a script by Paul Schneider)

I

The view Kirk was studying at the moment differed little from the one normally projected on the main screen up on the *Enterprise*'s bridge. Except the brilliant specks immersed in the sea of shifting black were a uniform white instead of the variegated spectrum of a normal universe. True, the floating motes did vary in brightness and intensity, as did the pale swirls of chalcedony-colored nebulae that formed a backdrop for the white spheres. But it remained a universe singularly devoid of color.

Kirk made a movement with his right hand and a cascade of new stars permeated the void. Contemplating the result, he smiled.

Perhaps the theologians were right after all and there was some idle omnipotent force Out There that treated the real universe with the same studied indifference he was now lavishing on this private one. He moved his hand holding the instrument once more, and the tiny circular cosmos became a maelstrom of white particles and cream-colored cloud-shapes.

"Come on, Arex, play something for us."

Kirk recognized the voice of Sub-lieutenant M'turr and glanced up from his dreams.

M'turr stood off in the far corner of the Officers' Lounge. She and several of the other younger officers had cornered Arex and were gently pleading with him.

The Edoan navigator, like most of his kind, preferred his own company to that of others. This was the outgrowth of a natural shyness and strong sense of modesty, not of any feeling of awkwardness around other beings.

Ordinarily, the crew respected Arex's desire to keep to himself. Kirk wondered what would have prompted them to intrude on the navigator in an off-duty moment of privacy. Curiosity astir, he moved closer to the group; and when one of the belligerent officers moved aside, the reason for the sudden assault on the Edoan's privacy became obvious.

Arex had his sessica with him, and the rest of the crew around him were exhorting him to play. They were not being especially courteous, but Kirk found it hard to be angry.

Arex usually played in the isolation of his cabin. The fact that he had brought his sessica out with him was a hint that he was half-willing to offer one of his infrequent concerts. His sense of humility, however, required that he be suitably harangued until he couldn't escape without playing.

Arex owned several of the slim, flutelike instruments, keeping each one in its own special case. Certain sessicas were used for different songs, others only on special occasions or days of the week.

Sipping his coffee, Kirk studied the one the Edoan was half-consciously fingering now. It was made of some light, ivory-colored wood that shone like fine Meerschaum. Delicately inscribed designs flowed like crevices in the bark of a tree along the instrument's sides and baffles - Edoan trees and mammals and flowers - the work of some master craftsman.

"Do play us something," Ensign Yang implored.

"Anything at all - even improvisation," another urged.

"Really, my friends, I...," Arex started to protest, but his companions didn't give him time to finish.

"We've got you trapped, Lieutenant," an ensign wearing the insignia of the Quartermaster Department insisted with mock warning, "and we're not letting you go until we hear at least a one-movement Edoan cycle." The threat was echoed enthusiastically by the rest.

"Well..." Arex spotted Kirk hovering in the background and appealed to him. "Captain Kirk, can you not explain to my friends that I have to be in a certain outgoing frame of mind in order to be able to play for others?"

"I would, Lieutenant," Kirk said slowly, "except I'd like to listen myself." He thought a moment, then suggested, "Why not tell them the story about the Edoan contortionist who operated on Earth for nine months as an incredibly successful pickpocket until the police discovered he had a third arm?"

Arex hesitated, but once Kirk had mentioned the subject, there was no way the others were going to let the navigator go without hearing the story. So he told it, letting the absurd, amusing tale unravel in his lilting, sing-song tones. Then he seemed as embarrassed as pleased by the resultant laughter.

His nervousness abated - besides, he had run out of excuses - he shifted the sessica in his hands and moistened the curved mouthpiece. Residual chuckles faded into respectful silence, and a respectful hush absorbed the assembly. The Edoan blew a couple of experimental notes, adjusted several openings in the body of the instrument, then paused. He appeared to be looking at something in the distance. Even his voice changed, growing slightly rougher, charged with something out of his past.

"This song," he told them, "is in the form of an ode, in tripartite mode, and is called 'The Farmer and the Road.'"

A recording enthusiast in the group, who seemed to know several Edoan folk ballads, murmured appreciatively.

Arex set the mouthpiece firmly to lips and his boney, rather homely face assumed an expression at once sad and noble. He played.

Despite the inescapable alienness of the song, there was no atonality or sharpness about it. What stood out immediately was an ineffable sense of longing coupled with some mild, admonishing irony. The sessica produced long, deep tones of winsome mournfulness, rather like those of an oboe, but having much greater range in the upper registers.

Arex played easily, almost indifferently. At times he seemed to be falling asleep, then he would suddenly waken in a burst of rapid, calling notes. The delicate fingers shifted in triple patterns that grew ever more complex as he piled variation on variation on top of the basic melodic line.

Like the others, Kirk stood entranced and just listened.

Arex played for many minutes. When the last bit of honeyed sound slipped from the multiple mouths of the sessica, no one broke the mood with rude applause. But there were satisfied smiles all around.

"You liked it, then?" the Edoan asked hesitantly, when no one spoke. Ann Sepopoa of Engineering nodded softly, once, for all the listeners and asked, "More?" Arex made a gesture of agreement, obviously pleased. Another moment of thought, then: "'The Song of the Orchard-Master and the Twelve Polor Trees,' to be sung to children as they rest on their knees, provided they each see fit to ask, please?"

Supple fingers commenced rapid tattoo on the wood and Arex's head began to weave from side to side on his thin neck. The new tune was the emotional opposite of the one that had gone before. Lively, catching, expressing an interspecies joy which soon had the little group clapping in time, awkwardly at first but with increasing confidence in the peculiar skipping rhythm.

Kirk put cup to lips and became aware that he had ignored his coffee completely during the previous playing. It was cold now. Well, no problem. Coffee was an especially efficient recycler. He moved off and poured it into the proper disposal, drew a fresh cup nearby. Adding more cream and sugar, he stirred idly, listening to the music.

"Plays grandly, doesn't he, sir?" Kirk looked around.

"Hello, Scotty. Yes."

"Interestin' fellow, our Arex," Scott went on. "I'd like to know more about him, Cap'n, but ... well, you know. It's not that

he's standoffish, but he dinna have the sort of personality that encourages intimate questions."

"You know how shy the Edoans are, Scotty."

"Aye, Cap'n." He nodded in the direction of the concert. "It's just that to me, Arex seems more so than most. I'll give him this, though - passive he may be, but he's the best damn navigator in the fleet."

"Not everyone's naturally as nos ... curious as you, Scotty."

They moved to a table. Scott drew a drink of his own, Darjeeling tea, with a touch of nutmeg. He also picked up a hot muffin with loganberry jam before sitting down next to Kirk.

"You wouldn't be implyin' that Arex is normal and that I'm hyper, Cap'n?"

"We all know how ridiculous an assumption that would be, Mr. Scott."

"Aye," Scott nodded vigorously, "and if sometimes I do seem to...." He noticed Kirk's slight smile, responded with one of his own. "All right, so I'm not as restrained as Arex but then, who is, Cap'n? Except Spock, of course."

***

Kirk nodded agreement, but found himself drifting away from the conversation. Back to the music. The wild piping had turned positively rambunctious. He considered the generally held opinions the crew had regarding Arex. Shy. Introverted. Quiet. Restrained and relaxed and inoffensive. Scott and the rest of them would have been interested to know that Arex had not won his commission as Lieutenant by passing a number of exams, but in the field - during a skirmish with the ever-present Klingons testing the Federation borders. When all the officers aboard a small Federation cruiser were killed, Ensign Arex took command. Retreat, concealment, and then a re-engagement with the much larger, far more powerful

Klingon ship. The Klingon ship was damaged and taken as a prize - charged with violating neutral space.

Arex was entitled to wear three separate decorations for bravery, under his Starfleet citation for conspicuous valor. Kirk had seen the medals once. Arex kept them in a plain bag at the bottom of his personal-effects drawer in his cabin. He kept them at all only because he was required to wear such things to formal Starfleet functions, events that he shunned with dedication. Had Kirk told anyone else on board about the medals, the navigator would have been embarrassed beyond recovery.

So though Kirk thought it was unnecessary modesty on Arex's part, he kept the secret and told no one, not even Scott.

Everyone had to admit that it was this unassuming posture which enabled the Edoans to coexist alongside belligerent races like the Klingons and Romulans and Kzinti while remaining in loose alliance with the Federation. The isolation of their home world also helped. Edos was located in the Triangulum Cluster at the very edge of the spiral arm and was a jumping-off point for scientific expeditions studying the great energy barrier at the galaxy's rim. The planet was not in the path of expansion of any of the would-be galactic empires.

A very long-lived people, the Edoans were able to adopt a relaxed outlook on life. Their civilization revolved around home and family rather than around intersystem politics. Natural neutrals, their loose alliance with the Federation was a matter of convenience only.

One of Kirk's fondest wishes was some day to meet Arex's parents. He always wondered if the remarkable things rumored about them were true....

A harsh buzz, doubly so in contrast to the sweetness of the sessica's song, broke his thoughts. One of the lounge speakers blared.

"Commander Scott, please contact Engineering. Commander Scott, please contact Engineering."

"Now what?" the chief engineer rumbled. He took a quick bite out of the half-devoured muffin, washed it down with a hurried draught of tea. A quick touch of a button in the table and a small intraship communicator appeared in front of him. He pressed for Engineering, was rewarded with picture and sound.

"What is it, Gabler?"

The voice of the second engineer reported back from distant regions of the ship.

"Commander? It's those extra radiation shields again. They're still not responding properly to external adjustment."

"Are they goin' over into the danger zone?" Scott asked.

"No, sir, but there's some peculiar fluctuations I don't recognize. They may be harmless enough, but I wanted to know if you want us to try and set something else up to compensate."

Scott took a deep breath.

"All right, Mr. Gabler. You did the right thing in tellin' me. I'm comin' down." He flipped off the communicator, and the little screen submerged once more.

"Excuse me, Cap'n, but we've been takin' all kinds of strange stuff from outside lately, and some of it's gettin' through the ship's shields. I've had secondary shields rigged to protect the anti-matter nacelle, just in case, but they seem to be givin' us trouble, too."

"Sensible," Kirk concurred. "In the region of particulate debris from an unmeasured nova you can't tell what sort of radiations you're likely to run through. Better not take any chances with engine shielding."

"Aye, Cap'n." Scott downed the rest of the muffin in one gulp, following it with a sip of tea. He dumped cup and plate into the table disposal.

"Besides," he muttered around the mouthful, "we're gettin' close in now."

"All right, Scotty." Kirk rose. "I'm going, too." He glanced back over a shoulder. "Anyway the concert seems to be coming to a close. I recognize that crescendo. Arex is winding himself up for a finish." The two men started for the elevators together - Kirk to go to the bridge, Scott back to Engineering.

"It's been a fairly standard scientific run so far," he continued. "I don't expect we'll run into any difficulties, Scotty."

The chief engineer looked hopeful. "And so far I tend to agree with you, Cap'n, except I seem to have heard that sentiment expressed on too many occasions before...."

The door to the bridge slid open, and Kirk stepped into a realm of constant but controlled activity. As long as he had been Captain of the *Enterprise*, as long as he would be, he would never fail to feel that slight tingle of excitement as he stepped into the control center of the great starship - into the control center of one of the most elaborate and powerful constructs ever built - and realized once more that its simplest movements had to be duly authorized by him, by James T. Kirk.

Little Jimmy Kirk, whose secondary-school physics instructor had assured him he would never get past second year University, let alone into Starfleet Academy. He smiled and wondered, as he took his seat in the command chair, what had ever happened to that counselor.

If the bureaucracy ran true to form, he reflected, the man was now probably a top economic advisor in the High Counsel. Kirk's musings took on more immediacy as he shifted thoughts to consider the brief discussion with engineer Scott.

He heard a brief hum behind him, and seconds later Arex strolled past to take up his position at the navigation console - minus sessica. The bridge of the *Enterprise* was now at full strength. Overstrength, he reflected, when Dr. McCoy suddenly appeared beside him. The good doctor held a portable life-systems pickup aimed at him.

"I wish you wouldn't stick that thing in my face all the time, Bones." McCoy assumed a put-upon expression.

"Just the usual health checks, Jim. Considering our position, I think it's a good idea. Why does this bother you? We're taking more radiation from outside than the 'Lizer puts out."

"I know that, Bones, but the damn thing still makes me nervous."

McCoy chuckled, carefully passing the detector over Kirk's form.

"Why Jim, you sound like the natives who refuse to have their pictures taken because they think the camera's going to capture their souls."

"Don't lecture me when I'm being obtusely dogmatic, Bones." Kirk managed a grin. "I'm really worrying about the chat I just had with Scotty. We have been picking up some heavy, unusual radiation recently and he's concerned about its affecting the engines in some impossibly unpredictable way."

McCoy nodded knowingly. "That's just like Scotty, Jim. He worries twice as much when there's no evidence for it. A good, solid crisis hardly bothers him at all, because he knows what the problem is. It's the nonexistent difficulties that he *really* agonizes over!" He sighed.

"I wonder what his wife must go through when he's home. I can picture it, I can picture it. Can't you see him rolling over in his sleep and muttering something like, 'Darlin', your drive components need an overhaul and lube in the bearings.'" Kirk smiled in spite of himself, looked over to where Spock stood at his science station.

"Speaking of radiations again, Mr. Spock, let's take a look at our immediate environment."

"Very well, Captain." Spock touched a switch. The main viewscreen immediately came to life. Murmurs of appreciation were heard from those on the bridge. The Arachnae nebula had been painted by one cataclysmic, searing stroke from a

palette filled with ruptured atoms and annihilated energy. A star had gone supernova and become a glistening memory. In so dying it had raised in its place one of those strange nebulae that constitute the most spectacular headstones in the universe.

A sprawling, fiery mass of radiant gases and particles streaked across the screen - millions of kilometers of color, mostly electric white, tinged throughout with iridescent shades of crimson, azure and purple. The arms of fire were vaguely spiderish in shape and design, hence the name.

Kirk took time to study the fluorescent panorama, overwhelmed for the thousandth time by the infinite beauty and endless spool of glory the universe unwound. Returning to prosaics, he thumbed the recorder switch set into an arm of the command chair.

And spoke easily. "Captain's Log, Star Date 5525.3. We are approaching the remains of the supernova Arachnae." He paused a moment, studying the scene ahead, then continued: "Initial close-in visual observation correlates with advance telescopic probe-pictures.

"We are moving deeper into the nebular region at standard observation speed. Location survey will commence, as requested, with extensive measurements of expansion rate and radiation levels." Another pause, then: "Certain new types of radiation have already been detected. At present they exist in minute amounts and constitute no danger to either ship or mission. Engineer Scott is taking precautions."

Kirk clicked off the log recorder. That was that. A few days traveling through the region under study with the ship's automatic and manual monitoring systems operating at full capacity, and then they would be on to the next scientific station. Everything pointed to an uneventful yet interesting cruise.

No wonder Scotty was nervous.

"Mr. Spock," he said casually, "what do you think of Mr. Scott's unusual radiations?"

"They have been measured and recorded, and the results are now being analyzed by the computer, Captain. Some of the shorter wavelengths are indeed peculiar. But we have been receiving them now for several hours and have no hint of any debilitating effects. I cannot yet view them as a threat - Mr. Scott's precautionary actions notwithstanding."

"Have we any indication that this radiation might increase as we move deeper into the nebula?"

Spock, having turned back to the computer readout at his console, spoke while studying it. "On the contrary, Captain, there are signs that certain wavelengths are peaking now and, if anything, they should decrease in strength. Arachnae is entering a cycle of very strong emissions, but we should be long gone before any strong bursts reach this area." He hesitated.

"There *are* occasional brief bursts of a wave-form that does exhibit extraordinary characteristics. Extraordinary because they appear to be totally out of synchronization with the normal pulsations of the nebular center. These do seem to be growing stronger. But they are still too faint and of too brief duration for intensive analysis."

"Keep on it, then, Mr. Spock. That's the most interesting discovery we've made so far. Any chance the source might be other than natural?"

"Again, Captain, it is too early to form any definite conclusions. But I am working on it."

Kirk nudged another switch. "Stewart?"

"Here, Captain," came the voice of the head of the *Enterprise*'s Astronomical Mapping Section.

"What have we got on the rate of expansion?"

"Preliminary reports only," the voice replied evenly. "We're just now starting to receive information in bulk. Thus far the rate appears consistent with what we know of other nova and supernova remnants, though it seems to be high. A good deal

higher than the Crab Nebula, for example. Too early to say if it's anything remarkable."

"Very good, Mr. Stewart. Let me know if anything unusual crops up."

"Aye, Captain."

Kirk switched off, considered possible details as yet unfinished and turned back towards Uhura. "Lieutenant, inform Star Base twenty-three that we are now officially on station and commencing reconnaissance."

"Yes, sir." She turned full attention to her console, edged a little to one side and gave McCoy an irritated look. "Please, Doctor, can't you keep that thing out of my face while I'm working?"

"It's the only way I can effectively monitor the condition of your exquisite eyes, Lieutenant," McCoy replied, juggling the medical recorder and trying to keep it in line with the communications officer's face. She continued to move around at the console, but no more objections were offered - for all of two minutes.

"As you and others have repeatedly told me, Doctor, they're in perfect condition. Now, if you'll let me complete this call, you can then point that thing at me all you want."

McCoy moved away, shaking his head with an expression of exaggerated disgust. "I wear myself out trying to make sure everyone on this ship stays in perfect health and what are my rewards? Indifference, obstruction, lack of cooperation..."

"It is not that, Doctor," Spock suggested helpfully, "but rather that the desire to insure our health sometimes appears to be overridden by an exaggerated sense of what I would call the mothering instinct."

McCoy stopped short, looked up quickly from the recorder's readouts.

"*Mother* instinct?"

"Your constant solicitude sometimes laps over into an empathic condition of such a degree that it can only be properly defined as such," the first officer continued blandly. "If you will objectively analyze some of your actions, you will clearly see that...."

"Now just a minute. Just a doggone minute," McCoy began hotly. "If anyone's going to do any analyzing of reactions here, it's...."

Uhura broke in, "Excuse me a minute, Doctor." All three officers turned to face her. "Captain, I'm getting some strange interference on the subspace radio, everything in the upper registers."

"Any trouble in getting through to Starbase?"

She shook her head, a puzzled expression on her face. "No, Captain. I'm sure they got the message, albeit a little fuzzily. But this interference is ... patturned. If it's a signal, I don't recognize it. It doesn't conform to any *known* pattern, though, distress or otherwise."

"Can you pinpoint the source."

"Just another moment, I think...."

There was a long pause while the communications officer worked busily at her console. Occasionally she would trade questions and answers with Sulu or Arex.

"There's a record of a star, with a single planet, in the region the interference appears to be coming from, Captain. Drone records on the system are slight or nonexistent, but..." She looked thoroughly confused.

"There's no mention of the area producing any kind of radio emissions. Nothing beyond the normal electromagnetic discharge of the star itself, and it shouldn't produce anything up in these wavelengths. Nothing about them in either the drone records or," she glanced away for a moment to scan another readout, "or in standard radio-telescope surveys of that area."

"Step up amplification and put it on the speakers," Kirk ordered. "Let's hear them. Maybe it'll strike a response in someone else."

Uhura shrugged, looked dubious, but turned back to her instruments and made the adjustments. A minute later the bridge was inundated with a sound like a million electrified shrimp all chattering at once. Normal star chatter, it seemed.

But at ordered intervals they heard a definite, harsh, though modulated screech that pierced the standard static with a regularity that fairly screamed *"Intelligence!"*

Uhura was right when she said it corresponded to no known broadcast signal - at least, not that of any civilization Kirk was familiar with. Nor anyone else, for that matter. While they listened and wondered, Spock worked at the computer. Great insights were not forthcoming.

"Signals appear random," he said, watching the flow of figures and words across the readout. "There are a number of possibilities. We may be receiving only disjointed parts of a more complete message and that may be why the pulsations make no sense."

"Could it be a radio mirage?" Kirk ventured. "There's certainly enough energy flowing for light-years around to transfer an awfully distant one."

"An interesting possibility that cannot be ruled out, Captain."

"Radio mirage?" McCoy looked properly blank.

"They've been known only for a century or so, Bones," Kirk explained. "They happen when a broadcasting civilization shoots signals in the direction of a highly active electromagnetic energy source, which then boosts and bounces them all over the cosmos, though usually badly distorted. Primitive radio-telescopes on Earth were picking them up for years without ever knowing what they really were.

"And the high cycle of activity Arachnae is entering would be particularly conducive to such," he finished. "It's as good a guess as to what these unknown pulses are as any."

"Correction," Spock put in laconically. "There is one identifiable word detectable in the pattern." Kirk quieted, leaned forward slightly and listened intently. After another minute of trying to sort something recognizable out of the blare of noise, he shook his head.

"I still don't recognize anything, Mr. Spock."

"That is because it is in Interset code, Captain. If you grant the fact that someone may still be using it."

"Interset," Uhura repeated. "A standard deep-space communications code - but one that has been out of use for nearly two centuries. A contradiction within a puzzle. I'm not conversant with *all* the old codes, Mr. Spock. What's the one word ... help, hello ... what?"

"It would seem to be in phonetic English, Captain; but the word itself has no meaning. It may be an archaic term. When decoded, the signal spells the word *T-e-r-r-a-t-i-n* ... Terratin."

Kirk considered a moment. "Try your directional receivers, cued to the code frequency being utilized, Lieutenant. See if we can't pick up more of that message."

Uhura promptly returned to work at her instruments. But before she could make any readjustments the tiny screech which constituted the single burst of interpretable energy had faded abruptly from the speakers. Only normal star hiss was heard on the bridge. She tried the directional pickups anyway, in hopes of regaining that one elusive attempt at communication - if it was that - but with no luck.

"No use, sir. It's gone completely." More adjustments, then a long pause while she studied various readouts. "I just broadcast multiple queries in the old Interset code for further information. No response at all to our signals."

Kirk turned his attention back to the science station. "Spock, anything on that code word yet?"

"No, Captain," the first officer replied, still staring into his hooded viewer. "The computers show no ancient interpretation of the word. Nor do exhaustive scans of all variants of Interset code give any clue to what it might mean."

"Was it a random broadcast, Mr. Spock? A radio freak, perhaps?"

"No, sir. That signal was repeated at least twice, on a patently non-natural frequency ... and possibly more often. It is difficult to be precise considering the amount of background interference."

Kirk paused thoughtfully, the other officers watching him, waiting. The only noise on the bridge now was the muted hum of instrumentation, the steady babble of interstellar static over the speakers.

"Two times ... one too many for semantic coincidence. It has to be of human origin, then. Mr. Sulu," Kirk said crisply, swiveling back to face the helm navigation console, "lay in a course for...," he hesitated until the name of the obscure star came to him, "...Cephenes."

"Aye, sir," Sulu acknowledged, bending over his controls.

That decision caused McCoy to lower his health scanner and walk over to stare uncertainly at Kirk.

"Jim, you don't mean you're going to abandon the survey mission to check out some coincidence of stellar electronics that might or might not be part of a two-centuries dead code? At the outside, the most it might be is the dying gasp of some forgotten deep-space drone probe. Meaningless stuff. Ships run across that kind of junk all the time."

"Maybe meaningless at the moment, Bones. But there's no record of anyone having come across any old Federation artifacts anywhere near this region. It's well away from the

historical exploration routes. And I'd sure like to see any 'old dead probe' that can put out a traceable signal this far from Cephenes. Must have been some probe. No, it doesn't make sense. There are other possibilities, too, that we haven't fully considered."

"Such as?" McCoy challenged.

"An intelligence someplace that somehow picked up the Interset code and is trying to contact us." He gave a soft shrug. "There are a host of possibilities."

"We've no indication that the signal - if it was a signal - was even directed at us."

"True enough." The Captain nodded. "I admit it's a long shot, Bones. But if there's even a chance of it being anything more, we're bound to check it out ... even if that means deviating from our planned course. I'm rather surprised at you. Where's your spirit of adventure, Bones?"

"On top of a three-centimeter microscope slide. That's far enough off course for me, Jim."

Kirk glanced to his right. "Mr. Spock, continue intensive research on the word 'Terratin.' Check pre-Interset codes, too. There's always the chance the word may be a carry-over from an earlier, more primitive version of the code."

"I've been doing so, sir," Spock replied. "No significant historical references have been revealed as yet. I suspect that if any do exist they are certainly pre-Federation."

Kirk looked disappointed. McCoy merely turned away, muttering under his breath. "Waste of time if you ask me." Hefting the health recorder, he moved toward the helm. "Sulu, you're next."

"I'm in perfect health, Doctor."

"That's what they all say," McCoy countered, "until they show up in Sick Bay complaining of internal pains, vomiting,

headache and irregularity and want to know why I didn't spot something two weeks in advance of symptoms."

"Precautionary checkups are an excellent idea, Lieutenant Sulu," came sudden advice from Spock's station. "It is illogical to object to the doctor's informal checks."

"Well, thank you, Spock," said McCoy, surprised and pleased at support from a totally unexpected quarter.

"Although," the first officer continued mildly, "I see no reason why they could not be performed with considerably less frequency than at present."

"I'll keep that in mind, Spock," McCoy said, "because you're next...."

II

Actually, McCoy's concern for the mission was exaggerated. They were not too far from Cephenes, so they could examine the source of the mysterious signal and return to the scientific mapping of the huge nebula with little time lost.

Cephenes' lone planet proved to be a world of constant upheaval. Considerably drier and somewhat smaller than Earth, it resembled a convulsed Mars. The atmosphere was in continual motion, as unstable and violent as the surface.

Sulu set a low orbit and the bridge complement stared at the screen as one external viewer after another provided varying closeups of the planet below. Telescopic subviews revealed shimmering flares of crimson and yellow, occasionally blending into violent orange eruptions as volcanoes belched forth the globe's insides at sporadic intervals.

"Cephenes One ... and only," Sulu reported formally.

"Doesn't look very hospitable," McCoy observed prosaically.

"Mr. Spock, any information on conditions below?" Kirk asked.

"Our only data are from that single early drone probe to this region, Captain, and it passed through the system very fast. Clearly there was nothing to trigger its automatics for a longer stay. We have no record of anything beyond the lower life-forms existing on the surface. Nor, indeed, mention of anything beyond a few basic statistics."

On the viewscreen an enormous orange-red flare temporarily obliterated the view.

"Two items of interest, though. The atmosphere is high in rare gases, but breathable - and surface conditions are indicated

as being approximately normal."

Kirk studied the screen. Another gigantic flare tinged distant clouds with hellfire. "Normal, hmmm? So either the probe's instrumentation was at fault, or else these eruptions are a fairly recent phenomenon." He looked at once satisfied and disappointed.

"That probably accounts for our strange 'signal.' Natural source after all. Volcanic eruptions can produce great bursts of short-lived electromagnetic discharge. I still think it's a mighty peculiar coincidence, but it's possible. Still, we're here. We might as well run a more thorough survey. Keep scanners on and recording, Mr. Sulu?"

"Yes, sir. Anything in particular you'd like to see on the screen?"

"There doesn't seem to be anything particular. No...," he watched the changing images of tectonic belligerence. "I see nothing we haven't observed on a half-dozen similar worlds before. We'll run an equatorial survey. If our 'signal' doesn't repeat itself - and I'm not optimistic - we'll return to our planned mission." He glanced back at McCoy.

"You were right, Bones. There's nothing to waste our time on, here."

***

Actually, this was not entirely so. But at that point Kirk had seen no reason to think otherwise. Had he utilized the starship's high-resolution scopes on a certain area, however, he might have seen something interesting. A particularly protected, barren-looking valley, for example, dominated by towering crags of black and dirty gray, some of which were more ragged than others. Thick streams of viscous molten rock poured down their slopes. Occasionally a crisped-over river would crack, and harsh yellow light would flood the jumbled cliffs and crevasses.

A valley of utter desolation, then, no different from dozens the *Enterprise* had already passed over...

From an area to the north of a portion of rugged basalt, a beam of intense light suddenly leaped across the valley floor. Instead of a shard of broken, twisted stone, it struck a hemispheric, concave dish studded with curvilinear projections.

The dish was camouflaged, hidden, but the polished metal was clearly the work of something other than nature. Seconds, and then the twisted protuberances began to glow brightly. Slight motion and the dish readjusted itself. From the omphalos a powerful beam probed the ash-laden sky.

Simultaneously, the dish generated another beam, a twin of the one still locked on from across the valley. It disappeared into the distance. Kilometers away, another sky beam replied immediately. Another, and yet again as a webwork of light sprang up across the valley.

Soon the blasted landscape was a bouquet of cloud-piercing beams, all entwined in the atmosphere in a mysterious, purposeful pattern - a photonic macrame.

All the while, the lava fountains played on in more substantial counterpoint to the sudden eruption of light.

***

Kirk relaxed and turned, bored, from the viewscreen. He had orbited over plutonic landscapes before, over hell-worlds far more spectacular than the one below. He had toured with an Academy class through the Nix Olympica thermal power station on Mars. No, there was nothing here to hold them. The survey would take but a few minutes more.

"Let me know when we've completed initial orbit, Mr. Sulu. A single circuit should be enough."

"Aye, sir." Sulu studied instrument readouts, announced moments later: "Coming up on primary termination, sir."

Involved in winding up their scan, no one noticed the unusual frown that came slowly over Spock's face. Nor the even more unusual gesture that followed. He squinted. His attention was

focused on a small readout set just above the main computer screen at the science station.

A gently weaving line there had abruptly produced a violent visual hiccup which sent the line shooting off the top of the screen. Spock jabbed a switch and the moving line froze instantly. Another dial was gently turned and the monitoring gauge ran the readout backwards.

Undeniably, something had given the scanner involved a severe jolt. A powerful jab, as if something had kicked into it from below.

He allowed the dial to snap all the way back. Once again the screen showed a pattern of standard wave disturbances, the easy flowing line. Spock touched another control and a still picture of the violent distortion appeared on the main screen. Isolated, but just possibly....

"Captain, I have registered a prodigious wave-disturbance. An electronic impulse of some sort has just passed through the ship."

All hint of relaxation or lassitude gone, Kirk sat up straight in his chair. "Type and source?"

"Unidentified, unknown," the science officer replied tersely, still studying the readout. "It was a single brief burst, very sharp. If the source is still active, it's extremely faint and diffuse. Too much so to pinpoint while we continue orbit." He looked away from the viewer.

"I suggest we synchronize orbit with the surface at the impulse reception point, Captain, until the effects can be analyzed. Though there is no evidence of damage." He exchanged glances with his fellow officers.

"Bridge reports?"

Sulu made a quick check of the helm monitors. "All instruments functioning. Ship's condition is normal. All status lights green. No damage calls from any sections."

"Warning sensors stable," Uhura said, and Arex added, "External scans detect nothing abnormal, sir."

Kirk drummed fingers on the arm of his chair. It was a definitive rhythm which Sulu had been trying to identify ever since he had joined the *Enterprise*. Some day he would get it.

"You're sure it passed through the ship, Mr. Spock?"

Spock appeared mildly miffed. "Absolutely, Captain. A rapid burst of an unknown type of energy. It is the apparent generative power behind it which impels my concern."

Kirk grunted, hit a switch on the chair arm. "Bridge to Engineering." A wait, then, "Scotty, we just took an energy impulse of unknown type. How are your engines?"

"A moment, Cap'n." A longer wait while everyone on the bridge visualized Scott hurriedly checking half a hundred lights and gauges. The chief engineer's voice came over the bridge as he worked the intercom multiple.

"Davis?" he asked, talking to an unseen subordinate.

"Chief?"

"Any problems?"

"Problems, Chief? What kind of problems?"

"Thanks, Davis .... that's what I wanted to know." Back on the main com, now. "Purrin' like kittens, Cap'n. Why, what's going on?"

"Probably nothing, Scotty, but keep a close eye on your telltales just the same."

Scott sounded confused, but willing. "Will do, sir."

Kirk tried a final possibility. After the inanimate machinery, there was one other component that required checking.

"Bridge to Sick Bay. Bones?"

"Here, Jim."

"We've just taken an unidentified energy impulse. Any effect on the lab animals or crew?"

"No sudden sicknesses, if that's what you mean, Jim. Just a second and we'll check the lab animals. Christine?" He looked around for his assistant.

"Doctor?" She responded from her station.

"Time to check the guineas."

Leaving her station, Nurse Chapel followed McCoy into one of the interconnecting lab rooms. This particular chamber boasted a double thick door. It was designed for holding both alien and domestic life-forms, from beings the size of a horse down to new viral strains. The present population was starship standard, small, and quietly spectacular.

To doctor and nurse, however, the flashy experimental animals were everyday acquaintances. McCoy went first to the modest aquarium.

Nothing could look more ordinary. Small stones, waving water plants and even a few decorative bits of coral offered naught to tease the eye. One had to look much closer to see that the sole occupant was most definitely not ordinary.

Rather like a cross between the tropical trumpet and angelfish of the warm Terran ocean, the single fish was beautiful enough. What turned it from beauteous to breath-taking was the extraordinary ring of rainbow light that encircled it completely from top to bottom, floating centimeters away from the body proper.

No one had yet figured out how the halo fish produced its remarkable Saturnian ring. Its brilliance shaded the phosphorescence of Terran deep-sea dwellers into dullness.

The importance of the tiny swimmer derived not from its ornamental value, however, but from its touchy disposition. At

the moment it swam placidly - and healthily - through its liquid abode.

McCoy examined the fish carefully while Chapel peered into several connecting cages filled with small creatures, paying particular attention to the large specimen in the far corner. The cages themselves were worthy of note, not just for their inhabitants, but because they were constructed entirely of black materials. Had they been of a lighter color, observation of any kind would be difficult if not impossible.

The little mammals inside were nearly transparent, to a far greater extent than the albino, sometimes translucent cave dwellers of Earth. Here was a true transparency, like fine quartz.

McCoy mumbled something at Chapel, and she shook her head. He pressed the lab intercom.

"McCoy again, Jim. Nothing in the experimental animals indicates anything out of the ordinary has happened. The gossamer mice show no signs of shock, and our halo fish..."

"Halo fish, Bones?"

"We acquired them two visits ago at Star Base Science Center. The ones that lose all color at the least environmental shift? They're as radiant and healthy looking as ever."

"You sure, Bones? Isn't it possible that something subtle could affect them without their showing any signs?"

"Not in these two species, Jim. But wait a second and I'll double-check." He beckoned to Chapel and indicated the aquarium. She walked over, rolling back one sleeve on her uniform.

Carefully, she slipped her hand into the water just above the slowly swimming fish. As soon as her fingers contacted the surface, the multicolored ring vanished and the zebraic array of colors on the body turned a pale white to blend in with the white sand bottom of the tank. When she pulled her arm from the water, both ring and colors returned.

"No, Jim. The animals are healthy. No sign of any disturbance."

"Good to hear. Thanks, Bones." He clicked off and turned to Spock, more relieved than he cared to show. "Your mystery wave seems harmless enough, Spock. You may as well continue your analysis while we conclude orbit. We'll hold here another few minutes.

"Mr. Arex, summarize sensor sweeps, please."

"Commencing condensation, sir. Condensation completed."

"Further detail on surface conditions?"

Arex studied his viewer, now linked to the *Enterprise*s's elaborate system of computer cells. "Sensor scans show a far more unstable surface than the old drone probe reported, Captain. Activity appears to be increasing almost exponentially. We may have arrived in time to witness a major blowup, though we do not have enough information to know for certain whether such a cataclysm is cyclic or extraordinary.

"Both eruptive and steady-flow disturbances are present. Given the current rate of tectonic activity, the emission of subterranean noxious gases will render the oxy-nitrogen atmosphere unbreathable in a few decades."

McCoy had hurried to the bridge, curious as to what had prompted Kirk's tense check of their life-systems status. Now he studied the main viewscreen and commented, "Not that it looks very inviting right now."

"What about composition, Mr. Arex?" Kirk went on. Pronounced seismic activity often brought other, more interesting things to a planetary surface than poisonous gases. Heavy metals, for example.

"Composition appears normal, Captain," the navigator replied, turning his gaze back to the viewer. "As far as evidence of ore-bearing formations is concerned, I believe...," his voice changed unexpectedly, "Captain ... a light below. It appears to be shifting. I think..."

And then he was staggering back from his console, clutching at his narrow face. "My eyes...!"

The suddenness of the outburst had shocked everyone into immobility ... doubly shocked them, coming as it had from the near-whispering Arex. Then Sulu rose to help his friend. Grabbing at the steadying support of the helmsman with one hand, Arex kept his other two over his eyes.

Meanwhile, Spock's eyes had been affected, too. The reason Sulu had been first to Arex's aid was because the science officer had been stunned by the abrupt explosion of lines on the upper screen - lines similar to the one that had so troubled him when it first passed through the ship moments ago.

Now the sensor in question was receiving that subtle, powerful impulse at a steady, unwinking rate.

"Captain," Spock said anxiously, "we are now under a non-communications beam of some potency. It's effects cannot..."

"Sound red alert!" Kirk ordered before the first officer could finish. He had no access to Arex's viewer, no sight of Spock's gauges. But the reaction of his navigator coupled with Spock's sudden announcement was sufficient to tell him something was definitely wrong.

"Uhura...!"

The lieutenant was moving too rapidly to obey. Her hand shot toward the alarm switch, stopped before she could reach it. Something froze her in her seat. Froze Kirk in the command chair. Froze Arex and Sulu standing together, Spock at his station - froze everyone on the *Enterprise*.

Simultaneously the crew, their instruments, even the walls of the ship flared with a pale white luminescence. It was as if the ship were burning in the grasp of a cold white flame. They could hear a deep ringing sound, like the single toll of some great ancient bell.

Scott and Gabler were discussing the repair of a recalcitrant section of the ship's reclamation machinery when that awesome groan rolled through the ship. They stopped arguing - and moving.

In the main mess hall, hundreds of diners from the second shift were at mid-meal when all motion ceased and the light turned to creamy white.

It was the same from one end of the starship to the other - from Hydroponics to Astrophysics, from recreation rooms to sleeping quarters, from the salvage hold to the synaptic study center.

The *Enterprise* had been neatly pinned like a metal butterfly on a blackboard. It hung enveloped in an icy radiance produced by many beams erupting on the surface, forming an intricate webbing around the pinioned ship - a webbing woven by the multiple dish antennae that pockmarked the floor of a certain barren valley far below.

Trapped in that spectral radiance, the *Enterprise* drifted for long moments. Then the tired landscape below convulsed in a tremendous eruption. Several of the beams vanished as automatic antennae were thrown off their mounts. Others were buried by a steady avalanche of magmatic material.

With its interdependent, complex pattern broken, the rest of the beams shut down. On the *Enterprise*'s bridge the last reverberations of that thunderous peal died away. There was a brief moment of uncertainty as the ship lights flickered and finally steadied. They were somewhat dimmer than normal, but showed no sign of weakening further.

In the absence of sound there was motion, as those on the bridge began the comforting routine of checking first themselves and then their instruments for internal malfunctioning. Even Arex, still blinking away streaks from his sensitive eyes, was back at his station, hunting for the source of the surprise assault on their senses.

A good conductor keeps an eye and ear on tempo and rhythm but lets his players play. Kirk waited until his people had had a

little time to sort themselves out before asking formally, "Anyone hurt here?"

A stream of murmured "No, sirs" came back to him from various seats. Uhura, Sulu. Arex, McCoy, Spock. He considered, made one concerned inquiry.

"Are you sure, Lieutenant Arex?"

The navigator looked back over his shoulder, the assurance of a dozen years in the fleet showing in every syllable. "I'm quite all right now, sir. I was only temporarily stunned, and most of that was surprise. There appear to be no lingering effects."

"All right, Lieutenant. Just the same," he continued firmly, "as soon as we revert from alert status, I want you to report to Sick Bay for an eye check-up."

"I was just about to order that myself, Jim," McCoy added. He looked over at the navigator. "You're positive there are no aftereffects, Lieutenant? No blurring of vision, strong retinal images?"

"No, sir," Arex told him. "I think - evidence supports it - that if there were any dangerous radiations in whatever hit me, the scope's sensors automatically screened them out."

"Let's hope so," the doctor muttered. Behind him, Kirk could hear Uhura talking rapidly over the inter-ship com.

"All sections report in. Damage and casualties. All sections report in ... damage and cas..."

Kirk had a sudden thought, caught Sulu's attention. "Mr. Sulu, any deviation in our orbit?"

"No, sir. Maintaining standard elliptical orbit. All instruments functioning normally." He looked back worriedly. "But we've been operating on impulse power since that whatever it was hit us."

Uhura broke in before Kirk could pursue the power situation further. "I have first damage reports coming in, Captain."

"Put them over the main speaker, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir." In a second the bridge was filled with the consecutive voices of various section chiefs, some confused, some slightly panicked, some admirably calm - all uniform.

"Mess section, no damage."

"Repair section intact."

"Cargo hold here, Captain, no damage observed."

And so on. Everyone had seen the white glow, recoiled under the ringing drone, been frozen in place. But there had not been any real damage. Not a broken eardrum or loosened plate seam. Odd.

Spock glanced up from his console, spoke quietly. "Captain, we are still receiving radiation from the surface, but it is greatly reduced - and altered. A most peculiar type. Our deflector shields are proving ineffective."

Kirk nodded quickly. "We just had ample demonstration of that. Let me know the second there's any increase in the intensity, Mr. Spock."

"Very well, sir." Spock returned to his instruments.

Kirk considered. After making sure to his own satisfaction that Arex was at least temporarily fit, McCoy had headed back for Sick Bay. He ought to be there any minute. Kirk pressed the intercom switch.

"Nurse Chapel here, sir," came the instant reply. "The doctor ... he's coming in now, Captain." McCoy's deeper voice on the com, now.

"Sorry, Jim. Just finishing a quick check of my own. We've no casualties reported at all. Arex appears to have been the only one even slightly affected by the attack."

"Why 'attack,' Bones?" Kirk wondered. "We've suffered no damage and no casualties. It might have been a natural

phenomenon."

"Call it my inherent pessimism, Jim. Anyhow, ineffectuality of method doesn't negate intent. Though I'll admit to the chance it was some random freak of tectonic activity. If that's what it was. I don't suppose..."

"As yet we've no idea what it was," Kirk told him.

"So then it wasn't completely harmless."

"Not hardly," Kirk observed. "Let me know if anyone walks in with any strange symptoms, Bones." A light was flashing on the arm console. "Scotty wants in. Kirk out."

"Sick Bay out."

McCoy flicked off the intercom and turned to Chapel.

"No one seems to have been injured, Christine. Let's hope it stays that way. Meanwhile, you can dig out the tape file on Arex for me. Also the ophthalmological standards and charts for adult Edoans."

"Yes, Doctor."

Engineer Scott turned and yelled instructions, liberally laced with suitable comments on certain probable ancestries, up at the four technicians who were running on the catwalk above him. Then he turned his attention back to the intercom as a beep told him it was clear.

"Engineerin' here, Cap'n."

"Let's have the details, Scotty. I know we're running on impulse power. Anybody hurt?"

"No casualties, Cap'n," Scott reported, breathing heavily. He had been doing considerable shouting and running, often at the same time. "But trouble aplenty with the engines. Every dilithium crystal's smashed in the warp-drive circuitry. Damnedest thing I ever saw. We're trying to rig a temporary bypass for them now."

"The main circuits, too?" Kirk asked incredulously.

"*What* main circuits?" Scott countered tiredly. "You have to see it to believe it, sir." He shook his head. "The big crystals in there have all come apart. Each of them fractured and re-fractured and re-re-fractured along its natural lines of cleavage until there's nothin' left but powder. Try to imagine an elephant steppin' on an opal, sir."

"What about spares, Mr. Scott?"

"I said *all*, sir. Even the spares. Whatever it was took a whack at us didn't seem to much care whether they were activated or not."

"And the other drive components?" Kirk asked, determined to know the worst.

"Nothin', sir. Only what shorted out when the activated crystals were pulverized. No problem replacin' them. Whatever hit us was damnably selective, Cap'n."

Somewhere in Scott's report, Kirk mused as he switched out, was the answer to the impulse beam they'd absorbed - and were still absorbing, according to Spock. He looked across the deck, found the first officer watching him.

"Though couched in emotional terms it would appear that Dr. McCoy's supposition may have some basis in fact," Spock ventured. "If this is truly a natural phenomenon, it has certainly chosen a sensitive portion of the ship to attack. Nor have I ever heard of dilithium crystals being affected in the way Mr. Scott described."

Kirk rose from his seat and started for the elevator. Spock followed. "We haven't seen it, either, Mr. Spock. But it seems that we're going to."

The chief engineer was waiting for them. They went to a small open hatch, stared into one of the dilithium holding cases for backup supplies.

"Not only is this situation different from anythin' I've ever seen, Cap'n," Scott was telling them, "but even if I had ever imagined dilithium breaking up, I wouldn't have visualized it happenin' like this."

"How so, Scotty?" Kirk asked.

"Well, sir, I would expect them all to go at once. Instead, whatever blasted us appears just to have initiated the process. The crystals are still in the act of disintegratin'. It's a steady process."

Moments later they stood before one of the operative grids. Scott made sure all activating circuits were inoperative, opened the double door and stepped back. Tiny crackling sounds, like glass popcorn, issued from within.

Staring inside, Spock and Kirk could see clearly what was left of one of the large dilithium crystals that not long ago had helped power the *Enterprise*. It had been reduced to a small pebble. And what was left was shedding tiny curlicues of itself, adding to the growing pile of dust in the grid. The curlicues were unique. Dilithium was the only mineral known subject to spiral fracture.

Kirk reached in, extracted a pinch of red-white powder. He studied the dust and tried to feel optimistic. The dust mocked his best efforts.

"This isn't going to power a toothbrush, much less the drive." He put the powder in Spock's outstretched palm and turned, heading for the engineering library. While Kirk and Scott looked on, Spock dropped the bit of dust into a depression set into one console. One switch sealed the depression; others activated the computer. Instructions were given.

"Any hope of recombining the powder into one or two usable crystals, Mr. Scott?" Kirk asked as they waited for the computer's verdict.

The chief engineer shook his head. "I know what you're thinkin', Captain, but the physicist who did that made a one in a million combination of heat and pressure work and he

wasn't sure afterward exactly how he'd done it. It might take us a hundred years to grow one crystal from this powder.

"You can't play with dilithium like modeling clay. Too much of its peculiar potential is locked in subatomic structures. Even if we wanted to try it we haven't got the facilities here.

"No, Cap'n. Our only hope of gettin' out of here and back to a refuelin' station is a recirculatin' impulse from our stored emergency power cells - what's left of it. But before we can try that there are broken connections and linkages all over the place that have to be fixed."

Kirk looked thoughtful, considering their options. "Could we possibly...," but he was interrupted by an anxious voice at the computer console.

"Captain, this is quite unprecedented."

For Spock to say something like that it would have to be, Kirk mused, as he and Scott moved close to the instrumentation.

Spock had removed the sample of powdered dilithium from its holder and, following the directions of the computer, placed some of it under a electronic scope. He was peering into it now, but stepped aside so Kirk and Scott could have a look. Kirk put his eyes to the scope ... and sacrificed a breath.

What had prompted Spock's typically understated comment was instantly apparent under the brilliantly illuminated circular field.

Dilithium was the only metallic substance whose molecules were arranged in helical instead of linear or linear-variant form. Now, even as he watched, the molecules were unwinding in various places, the chains spinning apart. In other molecules the chains were winding tighter and tighter until they broke apart, and then the fragments would begin to unwind or tighten.

In either case the resultant substance was no longer active dilithium.

This made his thin hopes of a minute ago obsolete. Even if they did manage to stumble across the near-magical process for recombining dilithium, soon there wouldn't be any honest dilithium shards left to recombine. Almost as remarkable was the fact that the breakdown was occurring without a hint of subsidiary radiation. It was a clean disintegration.

"Fracturing is spiroform," Spock went on, "as it has been theorized it would be. But it has never been observed to occur in an inorganic material like dilithium before - only in similarly built organic molecules."

Kirk leaned back from the scope, came down off his tiptoes. His mind was occupied by the impossibility just observed - otherwise he might have noticed what he had just done. He could be pardoned. It was the spiral structure that made dilithium the most rigid, stable....

III

Kirk's thoughts were broken by the nearing voice of second engineer Gabler. He spoke while walking quickly toward them.

"Mr. Scott, more trouble with the circuitry clearance. It's just that...."

"Blast," the chief engineer muttered. "What now?" He moved to the railing, looked down across the floor. "Now what, Mr. Gabler?"

"It's the tools, sir," Gabler yelled back up at them. They're too big for us to handle."

Several other members of the engineering section came into view. All held up wrenches, pliers, liquid circuit welders and sliders and molly-pugs. All appeared awkwardly large in their hands.

Scott didn't know whether to be confused or furious. If this were some kind of elaborate joke on the part of his section, at a time like this...

"You sound like you're all of you blatherin' ... no, wait a minute. Let's have a look." After what they'd lust learned about dilithium molecules fracturing, he wasn't about to deny the possibility of anything. He moved to the nearest ladder and started down.

"That's an odd thing for Gabler to say," Kirk mused. Then he found himself frowning, staring. It seemed as if something were not quite right about Spock, all of a sudden. Nothing obtrusive - the first officer looked perfectly healthy.

Then why this sense of vague unease when he looked at him?

For his part, Spock's reaction was a dulled mirror of Kirk's own. He was eyeing the captain, both eyebrows raised, an expression he reserved for more than idle occasions.

Kirk's frown deepened. He gestured at the computer console Spock was standing by, blinked. The light that had momentarily blinded Arex - was there some subtle variant of it at work in the ship now?

"Spock, are you slumping?"

"I've never slumped in my life, Captain," the science officer replied with considerable dignity. "But it is most peculiar. I was just about to ask you the exact same..."

"Security!" The violent call issued from the open intercom. "Any security, respond!"

Kirk rushed to the com., reached to turn it to broadcast and had to stand on tiptoes to do it. What was wrong with Spock, what was troubling Gabler - he was astonished at how calm he was in the face of the dawning catastrophe. Maybe it was the fact that, physically, he still felt fine. Or it might be shock.

"Kirk here. What's the trouble?"

His steady tone apparently reassured the voice at the other end of the line. It responded crisply, less hysterically.

"Mess Officer Briel, sir." The young officer was clearly trying to calm herself with the captain on the line.

"What's going on, Briel? Speak up - what's that noise behind you?"

"It's the second shift, sir. They're nervous and frightened and so am I. We need psycho assistance in the main dining area. At least, I think we need psycho. Maybe it's just me. Or maybe I just..." The voice was rising again and Kirk's tone turned hard, sharp, no-nonsense.

"Easy, Briel. I think I know what you're experiencing."

The voice was still tense, but the relief was audible.

"You do, sir? I wish you'd tell me. Tables, chairs, silverware - everything seems to have grown larger, too large to use. Women are losing their rings, hairpins ... everything. The people here are near panic, Captain, and I don't know what to tell them. I'm the ranking officer present and I..."

"Do your best to quiet everyone, Sub-lieutenant. Get up on a table - if you can still reach it - and make an announcement. Tell everyone we're passing through a distorting field phenomenon. We don't know how far it'll reduce us, but we will eventually return to normal. Meantime everyone is to improvise. Tell them to use their imaginations."

"Thank you, sir," came the much-eased voice of the mess officer. "I'll do that. Frankly, sir, I was beginning to get more than a little..."

"Don't waste time, Briel, or you'll have your full panic. Relay the information to Lieutenant Uhura and instruct her for me to broadcast it throughout the ship. Quicker dissemination that way."

And also, he thought, the responsibility would take the sub-lieutenant's mind off her own fears.

"Aye, sir. Mess out."

Kirk clicked off, noticed Spock still staring at him.

"Well, what are you goggling at, Spock?"

"You lie with great facility, Captain."

"You have this constant aberration in which you persist in confusing diplomacy with prevarication, Spock," he shot back. "Let's get back to the bridge. Scotty will have to handle things by himself here."

Having absolutely no idea what to expect, their shock as they returned to the bridge was magnified severalfold.

At first glance it appeared that the *Enterprise* was being manned by a group of well-drilled children. All crew members were sitting on the fore edge of their seats. It was the only way they could still reach the controls. Heads swiveled as Kirk and Spock entered.

Uhura started in immediately. "Captain, reports are coming in from all over the ship. The most incredible thing is happening."

"We know," he broke in. "The whole ship and everything on board has apparently expanded."

"An equally good possibility, Captain," hypothesized Spock, "is that the ship's personnel have contracted." He moved toward his library computer station and surveyed the abruptly oversized surroundings thoughtfully.

"And are probably continuing to shrink."

A moment of shocked silence on the bridge - somehow the idea that the *Enterprise* and its inorganic components were growing larger was merely ridiculously inconvenient, while the concept of the crew growing smaller held terrifying portents.

There was an element of grimness in Kirk's voice that hadn't been heard in some time as he turned to Sulu.

"Take us out of orbit, Mr. Sulu. Take us far out of here. Shut down all unnecessary systems ... everything but defense and life-support. Draw on every ounce of remaining impulse power. We've got to get away from this planet."

Sulu and Arex worked furiously at the helm-navigation console. Occasionally they were forced to shift awkwardly in their seats to reach a particularly distant control. There was a mild rising hum as fresh power was fed to the ship's engines, then a tense pause.

"Mr. Spock?"

"We're shifting position, Captain, but slowly."

A red light appeared on the console to the right of Sulu's hand. He eyed it, ignored it.

"Still moving, Captain," reported Spock patiently.

Gradually, painfully, the single red light by Sulu was joined by others. A brief hooting whistle sounded near Arex. He slapped a hand down on a switch and the hooting stopped. Sulu gave his companion a questioning glance. Arex bent to his hooded viewer, studied its contents for a moment. Then he pulled away and gazed at each of the watching, expectant faces in turn.

"It's no good, Captain. The engines are completely dead."

"Confirmed, Captain," Spock added, studying readouts. "We simply do not have enough dilithium left in the holding grids to activate the matter-anti-matter annihilation sequence. We retain enough emergency power to maintain basic life and internal ship functions, but nowhere near enough to drive the ship."

"Not even enough for a last try?" Kirk asked desperately.

"It would be foolhardy, Captain. The chances are on the order of thousands to one ... and we would surely lose life-support."

"Then that," Kirk murmured fatalistically, "is that." He glanced down toward his feet, shook his head and mumbled something Uhura strained to hear but couldn't. Then he thumbed a well-worn switch in the chair arm.

"Captain's Log, 5525.4. Our attempt to escape this world's gravity on limited power has failed after the ship's dilithium supplies have been wiped out. We are currently in a...," he glanced over at Arex. The navigator hit several controls.

Up to now the image on the main viewscreen had been a moving panorama of the planet's glittering surface. Now it shifted briefly to show a dull chart of the world with a blinking red dot floating nearby - the *Enterprise*. Kirk nodded and Arex banished the chart back to distant cells of memory. The roiling surface picture returned.

"...low but stable elliptical orbit. Main engines and circuitry are one hundred percent incapacitated." Again a look to the library station.

"Mr. Spock, what about that diffuse wave bombardment?"

Spock checked his viewer, barely able to reach it now. "We're still receiving a light amount, Captain, but it shows no sign of thinning further."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock." He spoke into the Log pickup again. "Unidentified radiation bombardment continues, resulting in either a contraction of our bodies or an expansion of the ship by a factor of...," he glanced to Spock again and the science officer held up three fingers, "...by a factor of three." He switched off the recorder.

"Lieutenant Uhura, broadcast a general mayday."

"Aye, sir."

"Lieutenant Sulu, I know how precarious our reserve power situation is. But see if you can't compute something that would give us a little higher orbit without risking a fatal drain on the reserves."

"I'll try, sir."

"Arex," Kirk's voice remained brisk and businesslike, "give me a power reading on all backup cells."

As everyone on the bridge busied himself about his immediate tasks, Kirk sat back in the command chair ... and discovered he couldn't even do that. He'd shrunk - or the ship had expanded - to the point that the chair no longer fit him easily.

He glanced over at Spock and studied the first officer in relationship to his surroundings. Assuming he was right and they were contracting, they now averaged about a meter and a third in height.

Then he stared tensely up at the main viewscreen and the glowing, angry landscape brought in close by the telephotos.

Normally it would have been enough to examine the giant volcanoes, the lava lakes and strange movement in the burning, tortured crust. But now he found himself straining for sight of something more.

His first theory - that they'd been subjected to some unexpected burst of natural radiation - was being rapidly eroded. What natural effect would hit them for a microsecond with no discernible effect, come back full force, and then suddenly change to a steady low-power beaming?

But what if Bones was right and they were under attack? What kind of an enemy were they up against - and why? What could their tormentors want. There had been no attempt to contact the *Enterprise*. The only explanation that seemed logical was that the world below held a low-population race - living underground, perhaps - that was inherently inimical to all outsiders. They are other than us, therefore they are to be destroyed was the usual rationale of such races.

Yet how could they know that the *Enterprise* contained creatures different from themselves? A problem, he reflected, that had plagued mankind throughout much of his own history. If they were under assault by an intelligent civilization, its founders must have a philosophical orientation radically different from the Federation's. Kirk watched the surface they hovered over, watched it trying to tear itself to pieces, watched and tried to visualize what kind of beings it could support.

What must they look like.

Sulu's voice roused him from contemplation. "New parameters established, sir." The helmsman sounded pleased with himself. Considering the miniscule amount of power he'd had to draw upon and the effect he'd achieved with it, he had reason to be.

"Our perigee has been raised by a significant amount."

Kirk made a positive gesture. At least they didn't have to worry about losing altitude until they crashed into the boiling

crust below.

They could sit up *here* and rot.

Uhura's report was less encouraging. "No reply to our universal mayday, sir. I don't believe we have enough power left to push a signal to Star Base Twenty-three. And there's no reason to expect any other ships to be in this region."

Kirk nodded somberly. "All right. Keep trying, Lieutenant." He glanced to the library. "Spock, anything new on the wave bombardment we're taking?"

The first officer looked up and shrugged slightly. "Only that it is complex beyond anything in my scientific experience. As a weapon it would appear to be not only extraordinarily effective, but the product of a devious mass mind. And yet, there are psychological overtones that make me wonder...."

"It's the physical ones I'm concerned with at the moment, Mr. Spock."

Scott's voice came over the ship com.

"Engineering to Captain Kirk."

"Kirk here," he acknowledged. "How are you doing back there, Mr. Scott?"

The chief engineer didn't try to hide the exhaustion in his voice. "We've replaced all the damaged circuitry, and bypassed what we can't replace or repair."

"Will they hold up if we have to press them, Scotty?"

"Well enough, Captain. That's not the problem. We can only run so long on impulse power before the emergency cells go. Then it's restart the reaction chambers or.... The well will run dry soon enough, sir."

"I know, Scotty. You've done what you can. Kirk out." He considered. Somehow they had to conserve even more power. They might have to try a last breakout, Spock's warning

notwithstanding. Then they would need every erg the reserve cells could muster.

"Uhura, reduce mayday signal repetition. One broadcast per ten-minute cycle."

"Reduce range, too, Captain?" .

"No." Frequency would have to do. "Maximum signal strength for the isolated broadcasts ... otherwise they'll be worse than useless."

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Arex, cut down on all sensor sweeps of the planet."

"Visual sweeps are already impossible, Captain," the navigator told him. He gestured at his finder - up at his finder. "My eyes no longer properly fit the optical pickups."

"And I can't reach the dial I turned five minutes ago," added Uhura, a rising note of alarm in her voice. She was reaching for the control in question, stretching on tiptoe and still falling short

Damnation! If they didn't shrink much more they could cope. But if they continued to lose height? He had had no compunctions about having the deflector shields turned off - they had proven useless anyway. If they couldn't break out of orbit and remained under the influence of the mysterious radiation, would they contract to the point where they could no longer operate the controls?

He was hunting for a miracle in a fog. What do you do in a fog first? Stay in one place, he reminded himself, and establish some reference points.

He hit the intercom again. "Kirk to Sick Bay."

"Sick Bay," came the familiar response, worried now. "Sick Bay ... McCoy here, Jim."

"Bones, I've *got* to have some answers. I know what's happening to us - what I must know is how, and why."

"Come down to the lab, Jim. Spock too. I was just going to call you. I may have something..."

Despite the fact that they ran, Kirk and Spock took much longer than usual to reach the lab. Not that they moved any more awkwardly, or that their strength was sapped, but they were now less than a meter tall. Sheer distance was making it more time consuming simply to get around the ship.

McCoy had to call out before they spotted him. The doctor was standing part way up a metal stepping stool, necessary now if he was to reach the instruments on the counter above. The cabinets above the counter proper were as much out of his reach now as the planetary surface.

He gestured at the laser scope on the counter, then stepped down to make room for Kirk. Fortunately, the device had a swivel eyepiece which could be tilted down as well as up. Kirk glanced in, feeling uncomfortable at the unnatural size of the scope lenspiece.

The slide was a hybrid, two sections joined side by side. The difference between the healthy stable tissue and the radiation-poisoned tissue was obvious.

Nonetheless, McCoy explained helpfully: "That's the test tissue I've been using on the right, Jim. From my arm, not that it matters. The stabilized normal tissue is on the left."

Kirk studied the accusing slide a moment longer before muttering, "Then Spock's theory is confirmed." He didn't look away from the scope. "We're contracting."

"No question about it, Jim. That's why our weight remains about the same, and why we haven't gone floating up to the ceiling with every step. The number of atoms remains the same. The wave bombardment is simply causing them to tighten, reducing the diameter of electron orbits. Just like the dilithium. Not to the shattering point, though - I guess organic structures have more resilience. Otherwise we would start

breaking up like glass figurines. At least, I don't *think* the shrinkage will get that extreme." He looked uncertainly to Spock.

"Though I can't really make any assurances about an effect that's never been observed before."

"Agreed," the first officer said. "A most unique phenomenon. It is quite interesting. I should like to study it at more leisure..."

"Except that we haven't got any leisure time left," McCoy finished grimly.

"An accurate if not particularly scientific description, Doctor. I believe the process is accelerating."

Kirk finally turned away from the depressing evidence displayed by the scope. Obvious perversions of nature held a horrible inevitability about them that no amount of rationalizing could dispel.

"How long could it keep on?"

Spock stared around the lab as he reflected on the captain's question, the lab which had assumed the proportions of a coliseum.

"Perhaps infinitely. Considering that the distance between electron orbits and nuclei is relatively as great as the distances between suns, even if the rate of reduction continues to increase it should take some time before we ... disappear entirely."

There was numbed silence in the lab.

"Dr. McCoy."

They turned as Nurse Chapel appeared from behind a row of cages. "It's the experimental animals, doctor. They're getting too small to be contained by some of the cages, the ones with wire mesh walls. All the gossamers are out already."

She held up one of the transparent quasi-rodents for them to stare at. It was perfectly proportioned and the proper size compared to the rest of them.

"Look how tiny they've gotten," she went on. "Just like the halo fish. It's tadpole size now." She looked back and pointed up toward the aquarium. They could still discern the sensitive swimmer, spectacularly colored as always, its satellite circlet fluorescing brightly - though now it was barely the size of a finger ring.

"And that," noted McCoy sarcastically, "is supposed to be a creature sensitive to the tiniest changes in environment." He snorted. "So much for the confident dictates of Starfleet Medical Center."

"Don't be too hard on them, Doctor," Spock advised. "No one could have foreseen our present remarkable situation."

McCoy took several deep breaths and eyed Spock significantly. The science officer's attention had been diverted elsewhere, however. He was staring at a large band of metal which dangled from nurse Chapel's arm. He fingered the double twist of shiny alloy curiously.

"Christine, what is the composition of this decoration?"

Chapel blinked, looked down at her arm. "it was made for me by the Knight Smiths of Libra IV. It's a common piece of costume jewelry." She lowered her arm and the now greatly oversized circle of metal slid off easily. The arm bracelet was more like a necklace now.

"What about it, Spock?" queried McCoy. "I didn't know you were interested in jewelry of any kind."

"A moment please, Doctor. It is not its aesthetic qualities which intrigue me at the moment. Knight metal alloy," he repeated cryptically. "An artificial construct. Yet the uniform on which it rested fits as well as ever. Your uniform, all of our uniforms, is woven from algae-based xenylon, I believe."

"Naturally. All regular Starfleet-issue work uniforms are made of xenylon," McCoy observed, still not seeing what the first officer was driving at. But Kirk was only a couple of steps behind Spock and catching up rapidly.

"I think I see what you mean, Spock. They've all been shrinking proportionately with us, so...."

"Exactly, Captain. I would be assured my theory is fact..." He was staring up at the aquarium, suddenly started towards the table it sat on. "One more example, I think."

Then he was climbing up the stool. Stretching, he reached into the water and brought out a small piece of floating coral which had become detached from the main mass. He examined it briefly before nodding to the others.

"The animals, the living corals, have contracted along with us - and so have their organically based limestone homes. Yet the rest of the material in the aquarium, the rocks on the bottom, remain unchanged and normal sized."

"I see. So that confirms it, then - only organic matter is affected," McCoy said. "But then how...?"

"Remember, Doctor," Spock went on, climbing down from the stool, "the wave impulses cause only spiral molecules to wind tight. The only inorganic spiral molecular chains we know of are those which form crystalline dilithium. Which is actually analogous in structure to one we are quite close to."

"The doubled DNA helix in the nucleus of every cell in our bodies," Kirk recited, echoing a line from Academy biology. The remembrance was small comfort. He frowned. "I suppose we ought to consider ourselves lucky, Bones. Some of the dilithium crystals self-destructed when their internal structure unwound instead of contracting. If we were subjected to the same stresses we would all be puddles of jelly on the deck by now."

McCoy shrugged. "It's all the same in the end, Jim. I'm not sure that I wouldn't prefer that to being a candidate for a flea circus."

Kirk had a thought, hiked over to the computer console. "Bones, what happens when DNA is compacted to its ultimate limits?"

"I don't think the strands would break, Jim, as Spock says." He walked over to stand next to the Captain. "I guess they just stop winding."

"Well then, if that's the case, we can calculate the limits of our shrinkage. It shouldn't be infinite."

"It is possible," conceded Spock. "I'll feed the question to the library."

Kirk and McCoy wrestled with the stool set near the scope until it was set close to the computer console. Spock climbed up, carefully walked out onto the sensitive keyboard. The keys were now hand instead of thumb size. But he had no trouble depressing them.

"Something else that we had better calculate just occurred to me," Kirk yelled upward. "How long can we expect to maintain effective control of the ship?"

"I have considered that question also, Captain. The computer will project a point beyond which the systems switches and controls will be beyond our ability to operate efficiently.

"I might also add, Captain, that we had better take care where and how we walk. Remember, our weight remains approximately the same despite our smaller size. It is therefore concentrated on a smaller supportive surface. It would be dangerous to walk out on a glass surface, for example. We would tend to go right through it.

"It appears the calculations will take some time."

"Stick with it, Spock. I'm going back to the bridge."

"And I think I'd better make some preparations, Jim," McCoy told him. "At the rate we're contracting there're going to be some accidents soon. Maybe not quite the kind Spock is thinking of, but related."

"Check, Bones. Spock, report the moment you have some results."

"Yes, Captain."

The walk back to the bridge felt like a hike of kilometers, even though Kirk was expecting it. He was also expecting a new view of the bridge. Even so, his first glimpse of what had become a giant's playground was shocking. He walked slowly toward the towering command chair, thinking furiously...

While minutes and centimeters continued to tick away, the entire scientific complement of the *Enterprise* worked overtime trying to find a way to reverse, or at least halt the contraction that was literally taking their mastery of the ship away from them.

They knew the cause ... the strange faint radiation from the surface they could not run away from. They could now calculate their rate of shrinkage. But no solution offered itself. They couldn't even identify the type of radiation.

The intercom buzzed insistently for attention. Kirk reached over to acknowledge the call, missed and had to readjust his reach. His arms had grown shorter in the last hour. That was the most frustrating aspect of the shrinkage effect. You had to constantly readjust your senses to a new size. A few crewmembers were reacting so badly to the constant change they had to be sent to McCoy for sedation.

"Spock here, Captain," came the voice at the other end. It was totally unreasonable to hope that the science officer had found any miracle solutions, but Spock had done it before. Unfortunately, this didn't look to be one of those times. The report was consistent only in its pessimism.

"Not only does our rate of contraction show no sign of halting, Captain, but it appears it may continue beyond our ability to adapt to it."

Still thinking about missing the intercom switch a moment ago, Kirk shot back, "How long can we anticipate retaining ship control, Mr. Spock?"

"I would say," the thoughtful reply went on, "that even with our most intensive miniaturizing measures and ability to design new compact backup systems, we will lose effective control of this vessel at the point when we become approximately one centimeter tall." There was a pause, then, "My present height is something like a third of a meter, Captain.

"I am coming forward to utilize the fuller resources of the library computer station ... for as long as I can continue to operate it. Spock out."

"Kirk out."

IV

The next hour was a hectic race against rapidly increasing odds - reducing odds, actually - as the *Enterprise*'s construction engineers worked frantically to fashion an endless stream of ingenious, yet ultimately useless miniaturized apparatus.

Ladders mounted on wheels and built of metal strips; long clamp poles and flex tubes for manipulating simultaneous dials and switches now far out of reach - a host of intricate devices.

It was, expectedly, a losing battle. Eventually all operations and energies above bare life-support maintenance were directed toward retaining control in two sections ... the bridge and Engineering.

Kirk leaned back and stared up at the cliff of the library computer station where Spock was running back and forth manipulating controls with tireless energy. But even with adroit manipulation of the new, miniature handling tools, Kirk could see that the first officer could not keep it up much longer.

Eventually he would grow so small he wouldn't be able to read the gargantuan printouts. He was minutes from losing the ability to use the hooded viewer.

"You said one centimeter was the critical point, Spock?"

Spock came to the edge, leaned over carefully and shouted down, "I beg your pardon, Captain?"

"When will we reach, the critical one centimeter point?"

"At the present rate of compaction I should estimate in thirty-two minutes, Captain."

Kirk nodded, acknowledging the inevitable, then remembered an as yet unanswered question.

"How small will we ultimately shrink, Mr. Spock?"

"One moment, Captain." Spock turned his attention back to the instrument panel. Surveying the angular field of levers and switches, he mapped out a plan of attack. Starting with a red triangle close by he hop-scotched his way across the controls. His only real worry was that his concentrated weight might shatter them, but fortunately the high-impact styrene remained intact.

Seconds passed. Then a billboard-sized series of figures appeared on the first screen in front of him. Spock studied them briefly, then marched back to the edge of the console. It wasn't the kind of answer he liked to give.

"There is not sufficient information to calculate our final reduction limit with any precision, Captain. I do have a projection on the time required for full analysis of the spiroid wave phenomenon, though, which could lead to a solution and method for reversing the process."

"That's great, Spock ... follow it up!"

"I would, Captain, but there is one difficulty. The time required for such analysis is estimated at between seven and eight years. As we have perhaps several hours remaining to us..."

Across the vast valley of the bridge deck, Sulu heard Spock's fatal pronouncement and clenched his fists in helpless frustration. Sulu turned back to the helm console on which he now walked, the controls growing more and more difficult to manipulate. He stared up at the main viewscreen. It still showed the same quarter of fractured land below them.

This Was not the way the men in his family had died! His ancestors would be ashamed to see one of their blood go

down without fighting, without striking back. There *had* to be some way, *any* way...

"Bypass that analysis, Mr. Spock," Kirk instructed his first officer. He turned, looked over at the huge clock balanced carefully against the base of the command chair. The clock had recently rested on his wrist, but like all other inorganic material except the dilithium, his watch had remained normal size.

Hours - they didn't even have hours if the rate of shrinkage continued to accelerate. They had twenty-nine minutes. Twenty-nine minutes before they were too small to control the *Enterprise*.

Cupping his hands, he shouted to the busy cluster of crewmen moving around on the deck.

"Everyone continue to jury-rig control systems. There's nothing more we can do."

"But there is, Captain."

As the rest of the crew continued with their tasks, Kirk and Spock turned in the direction of the voice, staring up at the overhanging edge of the helm console. Sulu stood there, looking down at them. His tone was one of desperation.

"Sir, request permission to direct phaser fire at the surface immediately below," he implored, and then turned back to his own task at hand before the captain could reply.

Sulu shoved against a waist high needle set in a timing dial, pushing it back several notches. With his concentrated body weight he had no trouble manipulating the huge lever. But his mind was on something else.

When no reply from below was forthcoming, he turned and moved to the edge of the console again. "Ten seconds, sir, just let me set it for ten seconds and we'll destroy..."

"Destroy what, Mr. Sulu? Sensor studies have shown that the unknown waves originate from an area kilometers in diameter.

We could assault that region for hours without disrupting whatever is generating the bombardment of the ship. We haven't got hours worth of power to divert to the phaser banks. We haven't even got minutes."

Sulu stood at the bottom of the circular timer, now clicking back along its present path, and continued to argue with the captain.

"What good does it do to wait like this, sir. Wait for a death *reductio ad absurdum* in the truest sense? Just one quick blast, Captain, to see what will happen."

In his concentration on winning Kirk over, Sulu had forgotten the timer completely. It clicked through the final notch ... to club Sulu behind the knees. Both legs were taken out from under him.

Falling forward, he rolled once, took a wild, desperate grab at the edge of the console and fell floorward. There was a disproportionately loud thump as he hit. It sounded convincingly fatal, but wasn't.

"Sulu!" Kirk and Arex rushed to the injured helmsman's side. The same gestures that showed them he was still alive indicated he was far from uninjured. He was clutching his right leg and grimacing with the pain.

"Damn ... mmphh!"

"Easy, Lieutenant." Kirk forced Sulu's hands away from the damaged area. He felt the leg gently, winced himself when he put miniscule pressure on a particular spot and saw the helmsman's face contort in pain.

"Leg's broken," he murmured to the watching Arex.

"Call Sick Bay for a bed?"

"No ... the sooner we get him down there the better. Besides, Bones doubtlessly has his hands full already. Let's make a temporary splint." Arex made an expression of understanding, moved off to located the requisite material.

"Try not to move it, Sulu. We'll have you down to Sick Bay as soon as possible." The helmsman tried to smile back up at him, managed a slight grimace.

"Good thing I fell on my head, Captain. Beyond fracturing, I think."

"Something about you is." Kirk was studying the deck nearby. Sulu's heavy, compacted form had put a noticeable dent in the smooth metal.

"These should serve, Captain." Arex showed him a couple of small metal strips of the kind being used to make miniaturized holders and grips. He had also appropriated a couple of organically based belts from several crewmen.

Kirk straightened the leg slowly, while Sulu fought to stifle the pain. It couldn't be helped, they had to get the leg straight. He set one metal strip behind the leg, the other in front, and proceeded to tie them tight with the belts. The thick straps were awkward to work with.

"Couldn't you find anything better in the way of binding material, Lieutenant?" he grumbled.

"I'm sorry, Captain," Arex replied. "None of the cordage in the bridge storage lockers would work. It is all inorganically based and therefore has remained normal size."

"Of course." Kirk pulled harder on the bottom belt. Interesting how certain small items had suddenly become indispensable - and unavailable. While others, like these belts, were proving invaluable. He found himself fervently wishing that, of all things, starship's stores had included a couple of horses.

He finished the improvised splint. With the help of the captain and the navigator, Sulu managed to struggle to his feet. Arex slipped a pair of arms under him - one across his shoulders, the other across his front - and finally put the third around his waist. Kirk added an arm to the other side.

"Let's get him to Sick Bay." He glanced around. A small crowd had gathered. "Everyone, back to your stations."

Moving as quickly as they dared, they half dragged, half carried the injured helmsman toward the bridge doors. They seemed kilometers away.

"How are you doing, Sulu?" Kirk asked awkwardly as they struggled toward the elevator. He was at his best giving orders, not comfort. For all his sometime brusqueness, that was Dr. McCoy's specialty.

"Lousy, sir," Sulu replied, grinning. "I'll make it." His expression twisted as he accidentally put pressure on the injured member.

"It would have been nicer, sir, if our ability to feel pain had diminished along with our size."

They reached the elevator doors - and came to a grinding halt. Nothing happened, even when they moved to stand right up against the metal. The now Brobdingnagian portal refused to open. Arex looked frankly puzzled. It took Kirk long seconds to recognize the reason.

"The body sensor. We've grown too small to activate it - beam's over our heads now." He left Sulu to Arex's support while he hunted around for something long enough. Everything seemed too big or too small, until he nearly tripped over a strangely shaped piece of metal.

It was barbed, thin, and bent in the shape of an elongated U ... one of Uhura's fallen hairpins.

Hauling it back to the doorway, he hefted it carefully, then made a sweeping motion forward, overhead. Nothing. Another sweep, coupled with a little jump - and this time the colossal doors slid apart.

Slipping the hairpin over his right shoulder, ready for use at the next doorway, he resumed his support of Sulu. Together, he and Arex helped the injured helmsman through the door.

Even more depressing than the situation on the bridge was the situation in Sick Bay. Kirk was shocked by the number of injured there, many lying on the deck on makeshift pallets of

bits of cloth and sponge. The fact that many of the blankets and sheets were woven from natural-based substances alleviated the problems somewhat. They'd remained in proportion to the growing number of patients, all of whom now averaged about eighteen centimeters in height.

McCoy and Nurse Chapel were doing their best to care for the injured. When the number of cases began to grow alarmingly, he had distributed the rest of the medical personnel to the various sections of the ship. That, he had decided, would be more practical in the long run than trying to bring all the injured to Sick Bay and would insure medical care throughout the ship no matter how small they shrank.

And though some areas of the *Enterprise* were more injury-prone than others, a large number still made their way to Sick Bay for treatment.

Chapel spotted the new arrivals immediately, nudged McCoy. The doctor bestowed a reassuring smile on a communications tech with a shattered collarbone and went with Chapel to meet the others.

He directed them to lay Sulu on an empty bed and knelt to examine the helmsman. "What happened? No, let me guess ... another falling incident - people aren't taking heights seriously, Jim."

"Broken leg," Kirk informed him. "He fell all right - from the helm console." Turning slowly and surveying the room, he counted the number of injured. "I might ask you the same question."

McCoy was bent over Sulu, moving an improvised miniature medical scanner over the leg.

"A lot more of the same, as I said. More and more fall injuries being reported all the time." He clipped the scanner on his belt, started to undo the makeshift splint. "Compound fracture - how did you straighten it?"

"Pulled," Kirk said curtly.

"Bedside-manner-wise you leave something to be desired, Jim, But it was the right thing to do."

"If we could only use a bone-knitting laser," Chapel was muttering. At Kirk's questioning glance, she explained, "We miniaturized all the medical instrumentation we could, Captain, but we just didn't have time for everything. We've been so busy." Her expression brightened.

"Wait a minute, Dr. McCoy, what about the tiny laser set in the auralite? The one designed to work on the inner ear? Could it be used for bone work?"

McCoy looked away from his examination of the leg, considering. "It ought to be easy enough to detach from the 'lite - it's a self-contained, replaceable unit. But bone work - I don't ... no, it's better than splinting. At this stage anything's worth a try." He looked back down at Sulu.

"I haven't mixed a plaster cast since first year Med School. I'd sure hate to start relearning now - even if the supplies are still manageable." He was getting excited. "Sure, let's try it. The 'lite's up on the shelf with the semi-surgical supplies."

"I'll get it," Chapel told them. She left while the others turned their attention back to Sulu. McCoy started to explain what would happen if the badly broken femur were allowed to heal by itself.

The lab room had taken on the appearance of a metallic replica of Zion Canyon on Earth, with sheer cliffs of white and gray closing in on narrowing channels. Chapel didn't need a map to find the shelf.

Up one of the movable stools to the table-top, from there up the angled base of the aquarium, and then an easy hike to the open shelf. Miscellaneous supplies were scattered about, hastily removed from containers as the people had begun to shrink. Spools of thread, small surgical devices now the size of shuttlecraft, all were strewn haphazardly about.

Several minutes of fruitless searching made the nurse think McCoy had been wrong about the location of the auralite.

Then the long polished tube came into view near the far edge of the shelf. The laser module was in the front of the device. A couple of simple twists on a pair of screw clamps, a click, and it was free. She held it easily in one hand - an extraordinary piece of medical engineering about the size of a small button.

It had its own self-contained meters. She stepped back to check the reserve power gauge in better light and stumbled. Her feet slipped onto a couple of large plastic skin-patches, now the size of folded tents, and the laser began to shift in her grasp. Clutching at it anxiously, she went over backward into the glass-sided lake of the aquarium.

The fall knocked the breath out of her and she had to fight for air as she swam back to the surface, still holding the laser. At first the incident seemed only embarrassing. The laser was well sealed and the water wouldn't bother it. She would climb out...

Only after regaining control of herself and her breathing did the first touches of panic set in. The towering glass sides of the aquarium proved unclimbable. And she was far from being the best swimmer on board the ship. She had to struggle to keep from thrashing about in the water and screaming in panic. Instead, she treaded water steadily and screamed at regular, controlled intervals.

Many of the patients in the main room were under sedation, so it was relatively quiet. Otherwise Kirk and the others might never have heard her.

Arex had returned to the bridge, but Kirk and McCoy heard the screams clearly enough. Kirk left the exhausted doctor attending to Sulu and ran toward the adjoining lab.

Chapel was already growing tired - she had no place to rest her legs and one arm had the double task of helping to keep her afloat while holding onto the laser - when Kirk finally located her. Following the same path upward he was soon standing on the shelf above the aquarium, looking over and down into the water.

He could hardly go in after her - that would leave two of them in need of rescue. Nor was there any miniature climbing gear in evidence. There had to be something on the shelf...

A now-enormous spool of metallic surgical thread caught his attention. Unwinding a sufficient number of loops - the thread looked and felt like electrical cable in his hands - he made a strong ring at one end and dropped it to Chapel.

She half swam, half flailed her way over to it. Maneuvering carefully, she put her head and arms through the loop. Using the spool cylinder as a brace he slowly hauled her up. A minute later she was standing next to him, gasping and coughing. Kirk found a shrunken lab smock that had somehow found its way onto the shelf, slipped it over her. Her shivering abated somewhat. The halo fish was a cold-water denizen.

"No more mountain climbing for you, Nurse. Understand?" Chapel ignored the warning. She was hunting through her pockets. Holding onto the laser and treading water had proven too difficult, so...

"Agreed, Captain," she panted as she produced the instrument, "but I've got it."

She insisted on carrying it herself as they made their way first to the floor and then back to the main room. McCoy studied it without speaking. Kirk watched him worriedly, waiting.

Finally, "What's the matter, Bones? Don't you think it'll work?"

"If you mean by work, will it still operate effectively, the answer is yes," McCoy responded. "That's not what concerns me. Normally this device locks into a much larger mechanism which in turn has standard size switches to operate it. I've never handled it directly - the contacts, of course, are far too small for our hands. I'm worried about getting the settings right" He looked at the deck, over at Sulu.

"No way to know without trying it, though. Nurse Chapel, shift the lieutenant's other leg to one side, please." Chapel did so. Then, while she and Kirk watched, McCoy improvised a stable

stand for the laser. Hesitantly at first, then with growing assurance, he manipulated the tiny control contacts.

Eventually he sat back on his haunches and looked up at Kirk.

"That ought to be right, Jim, though I still cant be sure. I've replaced this component with tiny handlers often enough. It feels awfully strange working it directly." He directed his next words to the helmsman.

"Sulu, if there's any pain - anything that doesn't feel right to you - you tell me immediately, understand? Don't go overboard on stoicism - anything twangs out of tune, yell good and loud!"

Sulu responded with a quick, nervous shake of his head. No jokes, now. McCoy took a deep breath, exchanged an infinite glance with Kirk, then touched a tiny recess in the side of the circular instrument. A beam of bright blue abruptly took up the space between lens and leg. It touched the injured limb on black and blue skin, where McCoy had cut away the tunic.

"Nothing so far," Sulu reported without being asked.

McCoy bent over the laser, squinted at the screen set in the back of it and made a couple of adjustments. An infinitesimal shift in the beam was the only noticeable result. Thirty seconds, forty - McCoy touched another hidden switch and the beam vanished.

"All right, Lieutenant, move your leg." Sulu looked at him uncertainly. He gritted his teeth and started to pull his leg up. The grimace disappeared as it moved easily. Now he flexed it slowly, then with increasing confidence, moving it from side to side.

"It still aches a little, Doctor." McCoy moved over and started feeling the treated area.

"Here?"

"No ... no ... yes, there ... that's the spot."

McCoy made sure of it, had Sulu straighten his leg again, then returned to the laser. Readjusting the device he activated the beam again, played it on the helmsman's leg for a couple of seconds.

"Try it again, Sulu."

The helmsman did, moving his leg at the hip, then at the knee, and finally raising it completely off the deck in a high arch.

"No pain now, Doctor. Only a kind of dull throb and a warm feeling."

"That's natural. No," he warned, as Sulu showed signs of getting up, "just stay there and rest for awhile Sulu."

"I'm going to need him, Doctor," Kirk said softly. "How soon before he can come forward."

"You mean you'll need him at the helm?" McCoy gave Kirk a look of admonition. "Isn't there a bit of wishful thinking there, Jim?"

"I try to think positive, Bones. If we have a second's opportunity to blast free of here, I'll want my best people at the controls."

"Sorry, you can't have Sulu for a while yet. I'm not worried about the bone - it has fully knit. But sometimes rapid repairs have their own effect on the body. Severe injury isn't the only thing that can initiate shock. It will take time for the nerves and blood vessels in that area to readjust to the fact that they're suddenly not on a crisis footing. After that he'll be as good as new. But he needs to rest for a little while, at least." He lifted the laser carefully off its improvised platform.

"Christine, move the base, will you? Let's try Solinski's hip next." He looked at Kirk. "Excuse us, Jim, there are a lot of other casualties here I'd like to try this on."

"Of course, Bones." Kirk turned his attention back to Sulu. "I'm tempted to call Chapel's thinking of the ear laser a lucky

break, Lieutenant, but..."

"Comments like that could result in a breakdown of command." Sulu smiled broadly up at him. "I understand, sir. Right now I'm too pleased with the results to care."

Kirk started to reply but was interrupted by a new voice. He turned to see Spock moving toward him.

"I have other results available now, Captain. Figures on the ultimate molecular contraction rate have come through."

"What are they?" Kirk asked, at once intensely curious and fatalistic.

The latter emotion turned out to be justified.

"Reduction factor of thirty-two-point-nine." Kirk did some rapid upstairs calculating, commented somberly.

"That means we're going down to one-sixteenth of a centimeter."

Spock nodded, spoke matter-of-factly, "Yes, Captain. While it is in a sense comforting to know we will not be tripping over dust motes, it is still well past the point at which we can exercise operative control of the ship. An interesting height from which to contemplate the world - and the remainder of one's life."

Kirk stood silently, watched by both Sulu and Spock. He thought back to Sulu's request of minutes ago. Everything was happening too fast. If they could spare the power from life-support, maybe by closing off all but a few remaining sections of the ship, maybe he should try phasers on the surface below.

No, they simply didn't have that kind of reserve energy left. Not enough for the phasers. But they did have power for something else. For one last choice.

If he was going to die, then the location didn't much matter.

"You have decided on a new course of action, Captain," Spock commented, evaluating the familiar thoughtful expression on his friend's face.

Kirk didn't even hear him. "Mr. Spock, can you calculate the approximate center of the wave-emitting region?"

"A simple enough task, Captain. But that will not necessarily be the point at which the waves are produced."

"I know that, Spock."

"May I ask the purpose then, Captain?"

Kirk shrugged, stared over to where McCoy and Chapel were busy repairing a yeoman's broken ribs with the laser.

"That is as good a place as any to beam down."

While Spock stood digesting this remarkable statement, Kirk moved to a nearby metal boulder. It had a flexible face bordered by projecting studs - a huge hand communicator. It would be quicker than climbing to a console and trying to operate the wall com unit.

Putting his compacted weight behind the push, Kirk had no trouble opening the grid. Making his voice strong enough for the pickup to be activated was another story. He had to bend and shout into the mouthpiece at the top of his lungs.

"Kirk to Engineering! Scotty, can you hear me?" A pause, then the chief engineer's voice acknowledging, altered, faint, and weak - but comprehensible.

"Just barely, sir."

"Get a crew down to the transporter room!" Kirk yelled. "We have twenty minutes left in which to operate ship's controls - including the transporters."

"How many beamin' down, Captain?"

"Just one, Mr. Scott. Me!"

"Aye, Captain," Scott replied solemnly. "Dinna worry ... we'll rig somethin'. Scott out."

Kirk stop, kicked at the deactivation switch to shut off the communicator.

"I'll meet you in the transporter room, Mr. Spock. Meanwhile, see what you can manage in the way of a doll-sized communicator. Anything at all, even something that just broadcasts a pulse signal. I'll send in code, if I have to."

"Yes, Captain."

"I won't be long. I've got to make one more check of the bridge and issue final instructions."

"I understand, Captain."

Uhura, Arex, and the others took the announcements with typical calm. They had an advantage - nothing Kirk said came as any surprise.

As he headed for the distant transporter room, Kirk kept their faces, reactions in mind. There wasn't one among them who felt those last instructions would not be implemented in a dozen minutes or so. He still retained private hopes, though.

There was one last thing they could try to halt the lethal bombardment. If an intelligence was behind it, then one had to assume the waves could be shut off as competently as they had been turned on the *Enterprise*.

In the absence of any attempt at contact from the surface, Kirk had to assume paranoid reluctance on the part of any such intelligence. In which event a personal appearance might be the only thing that could convince "them" of the peaceful intent of their visitors. He would beam down and search them out.

Alternatively, they would reduce him on sight to something considerably less than a centimeter in height - a thin layer of smoking dust, for example.

With admirable foresight, the doorway to the transporter room had been locked open, and a metal plate had been secured over the sensor eye. As Kirk walked toward the transporter console he spotted Scott and Gabler working at its base. Chief Kyle was busy with a crew nearby. They were rigging a doubled-back piece of strong wire to the console, bracing it against an empty wire spool secured to the deck.

A rapid examination revealed that the other end of the doubled-back cable looped around the first manual lever of the transporter control. Fortunately, that crucial switch moved vertically. If a horizontal control had been involved they would have had all sorts of problems, requiring at least one and possibly more miniature pulleys.

The other end of the wire was being played out to a crowd of patient crewmen. Each was taking up a firm stance and a tight grip on the wire.

Kirk placed a hand on Scott's shoulders. Sweat dripping from his face, the chief engineer turned quickly, even managed a smile.

"Well be ready in a minute, Captain. We can still manipulate the switches properly. It's workin' them at the proper speed that's goin' to be touchy, but I think we can manage it."

"Good, Mr. Scott." Kirk looked up, following the wire into the heavens to where it looped tightly around the handle of the transporter lever, now looking like a gray sequoia angling over the console cliff.

"I estimate our height is now down to about five centimeters," Scott ventured. "With maximum leeway I think we can manage controls for another fifteen minutes - no more."

"That will have to do, Scotty."

Kirk noticed Spock hunched down over a pile of material. He walked over as the science officer stood, trailing microscopic wire and hastily reduced hand tools.

The crudely made boxlike instrument he handed the captain looked ready to fall apart any second. Kirk hefted it, was gratified to see it was more solid than it looked.

"Unattractive but functional, Captain," Spock informed him. "This is the best I could do in rigging so small a communicator in such a short time."

"It's fine, Spock. Thanks."

"It is proportionately about ten times the size a hand communicator should be, Captain," Spock went on, still apologizing for the incredible feat of improvisational engineering he had just accomplished, "and its range cannot be guaranteed. How shall we locate you for return if it fails?"

"We haven't much time anyway, Mr. Spock, so that problem solves itself." He called back over his shoulder. "Scotty, set an automatic return for me. If there's anything to be found down there, ten minutes should do it."

"Aye, sir," Scott agreed. "Well set it now." He turned, yelled to several crewmen hanging on another wire. "You there - Johnson, Massachi, Nikkatsu - let go of that wire and give me a hand with this servopole." The men hastened to obey as Scott started to take up a grip on the long hollow tube.

"A disconcerting thought, Captain," Spock ventured, "that I have been pondering while working here. The transporter relies on a banked record of the body's molecular structure. Will that record adapt as well to your present height?"

"There is the chance, I suppose, that it can't adjust to the transporter pattern," Kirk admitted, "in which case, either I simply won't go anywhere - or else I'll go everywhere, in pieces.

"We'll know shortly. And in fifteen minutes it won't matter whether the transporter can bring me back or not. Prepare to energize." Kirk started for the transporter platform. Spock took a step to head him off.

"Captain, may I wish you all..." Spock hesitated, unusually. "I hope logical eventualities prove that ... good luck, sir," he finally finished awkwardly.

He and Kirk exchanged shoulder claps. Then Kirk hurried off down the endless metal plateau toward the alcove.

Spock watched him for a minute, then moved to take up a place along the doubled cable. There was a short wait while Kirk scrambled up the low cliff of the single step leading to the platform proper. The super-strong wire made an excellent "rope" ladder.

Once on top, Kirk ran to the center of the nearest disk, turned, and waved both arms.

Scott, lost in other thoughts, eventually became aware Spock was speaking to him.

"What?"

"The captain instructed us to energize, I believe, Mr. Scott."

Energize. He had a job to do. First wire one, then the two servopoles were adjusted, turned. Spock took up a place in front of Scott, both hands on the wire. Speed was critical now. Five seconds, ten...

"Heave, lads, heave! Heave for your lives!"

The line of tiny figures on the floor started backward. As the slack in the cable was taken up the line grew taut, held. Straining, straining, for millimeters at a time, they pulled on the wire. Pulled until triceps howled with the demand and shoulders threatened to pull from their sockets.

The lever began to descend. Slowly, condescendingly, but it moved. Servopoles made minor adjustments again. A dial was turned as men broke their backs on twin wires.

On the transporter platform a waterfall, a cascade of color, splinters of a rainbow, began to form. It was normal in shade,

normal in flickering speed, normal in shape - normal in all respects except for its incredible, abnormal *thinness*.

It completely enveloped the near-invisible figure standing at its base. The figure wavered, blurred, became a standard transporting silhouette...

...and was gone.

V

Even though he had seen it only from kilometers above, the landscape was far from alien to Kirk. He was studying it even as he materialized on the plutonic scoria.

What was surprising was the amount of vegetation holding its own against the threatening tremors underfoot, green-brown roots and branches offering defiance to lack of moisture, promises of sulfuric rain.

Kirk was aware of this, of the constant intrusive growl of smoking peaks all around - and something else, something indefinite and indefinable. Not the ash-filled purplish sky overhead, nor the thin layer of pumice that crunched under his boots. Something much more immediate. Something like...

A lessening of weight, weight on his right arm, weight that should have been nestled in the crook of arm and ribs and no longer was. Instead it rested neatly in his palm, a miniscule shard of badly worked metal and plastic.

The communicator Spock had presented to him only moments ago. He smiled.

Spock's suspicions about the touchiness of the transporter memory bank had been justified - only not in the way he had imagined. Instead of the transporter pattern adapting to his smaller size, it had operated on the old pattern stored in its cells, had forced Kirk's body to adapt to *it*. He was back to his normal size.

From a distant peak, an intense beam of light shot like a yellow bar across the valley and disappeared in a far-off crevice. To his right was another, beginning lower down but also meeting somewhere over a nearby ridge.

Turning a slow circle he saw that a network of light converged at one point just beyond his vision. He started walking toward it.

As he started up the slight grade he raised the communicator, handling it carefully. If it slipped out of his grasp he doubted he would find it again in the loose gravel and detritus. Peering at the tiny device he used his fingernail to put the lightest pressure possible on the activation lever.

A violent rumbling began in the distance, grew rapidly loud. Here was a throaty ripping sound, like an underground freight-liner rushing past. A flank eruption burst the side of one of the volcanoes behind him.

He spared it only a brief glance. At the moment he was more concerned about the tiny beep from his palm. He spoke at the communicator, hoped Spock's. improvised pickup would modulate his voice properly at the other end.

"Kirk to *Enterprise*. *Enterprise* ... do you read?" No reply from the tiny speaker. Maybe they were trying to talk to him, and his ears couldn't pick up their minute voices. He continued on the chance they were picking him up.

"I think we have the answer to the height problem. It seems the transporter beam returns our molecules to normal spacing. Nothing to indicate that once realigned and transported back aboard the whole compaction process wouldn't start all over again, but at least we've got a stop-gap now."

Still no reply. He tucked the communicator away in a pocket. The slope grew steeper here and he wanted to concentrate on keeping his footing. Also, the eruptions on the valley fringe were growing in violence and he wanted both hands in case of a fall. One particularly sharp tremor almost did knock him off his feet.

Once the dust and volcanic ash in the air grew so thick he had trouble breathing. And then, without sound or warning of any kind, the beam of light he was paralleling abruptly winked out. He looked around, across the valley, up the slopes of distant

mountains. The network of lights he had observed on beam-down had been completely extinguished. He brought out the communicator, tried again.

"Kirk to *Enterprise*, do you read me?" This time there was an answer. Faint and unnaturally high-pitched, but for all that immediately recognizable.

"We read you, Captain," Spock told him. "It was necessary to readjust power flow to the main communications board to boost your transmission to audible levels. Your makeshift communicator carries less power than I believed.

"A most interesting thing has just happened. If sensors are to be believed, wave bombardment of the ship has just ceased."

"I think I know why," Kirk told his astonished listeners. But before he could elaborate he felt an agonized heaving underfoot and the ground bulged. A crack like a sonic boom followed, and this time Kirk was knocked completely off balance.

Bracing himself he landed without being more than dazed, but something he had feared had come to pass. Despite his best efforts the tiny communicator had gone flying. Flaming bits of ash and lava started to fall around him as he searched for it on hands and knees. The fiery fallout was dense behind him, though less so in the direction he had been headed.

Several minutes of fruitless searching failed to locate the lost communicator. The rain of lava was growing worse and the sharp-slivered pumice had nearly butchered his knees. It seemed a good idea to move on. He was nearly to the top of the ridge and he ought to find some protection from the sizzling hail on the other side.

Scrambling to his feet he started upward again. Occasionally a hot ash would land on him and he would beat frantically at the ember as it smoldered on his clothes. But he still found no sign of whatever existed at the center of the vanished lights.

Once, a lava bomb - a tear-drop shaped dollop of molten lava cooled to hardness during its fall through the cooler

atmosphere - shattered near him. It must have weighed a hundred kilos at least. It would take a far smaller bomb to make a real mess of him. No use wishing for a solid duralloy umbrella, nor could he dodge the unexpected missiles.

But it was hard not to think about them.

Another sharp tremor. Ready for this one, he kept his feet. A meter-wide crack opened in the ground to his left, forcing him to change the direction of his climb slightly. Even without the time limit imposed on him he didn't think an unarmored man could spend much time roaming this surface. Sooner or later the steady assault would either batter him unconscious or cause him to break an ankle in the plethora of tiny crevices and cracks.

He topped the rise, ready for a sight of the unexpected - but not ready for the mental shock he received.

Down in a steeply walled hollow, not five meters from the base of the slope he stood on, rose the walls of a city. Graceful towers and arching branch structures were brilliantly lit from within, the whole metropolitan network intersected by a complex webwork of covered highways.

To one side were stadiums and a huge amphitheater, while another boasted a large factory complex. Parks and lakes studded the landscape throughout, while the entire city was surrounded by concentric rings of cultivated land, farms and dairy country. In all respects it was one of the most thoroughly planned yet exquisitely wrought cities Kirk had ever seen. It differed from the great cities of Earth and Vulcan and the major colony worlds in only one respect.

The whole metropolitan area was just large enough to fill the floor of an average-sized room aboard the *Enterprise*.

He stepped over the ridge, sat down in the grinding pumice, and stared at the scene from a book of children's stories. The tallest spire of the city came just about up to his waist.

As he sat frozen with fascination, another cycle of tremors shook the ground. He was certain that the delicate towers and

bridgeways of the tiny city would be shattered, yet they barely moved. Obviously those spires were built on some kind of flexible foundation, constructed to give with the constant quakes.

But this series of shakes opened a branching canyon near the outskirts of the farthest agricultural section. Kirk could have stepped over the largest crevice in the crack, but it would swallow the biggest building in the city with room to spare. Even as he watched, one arm of the canyon moved like a bolt of brown lightning in slow motion toward the city.

It was easy to conclude that despite its miniscule size, he had come upon an intelligent civilization which possessed enough science to immobilize and threaten the *Enterprise*. Despite the threat to himself and his crew, he still could experience a sudden fear that he might have crushed some outlying farmhouses on his approach. He resisted the urge to retrace his steps.

Right now he had to make contact with the inhabitants of the city. Clearly, their intellect was in no way proportional to their size. He studied the plan of the metropolis, decided the best thing to do was get as close to the city center as possible.

Rising, Kirk started carefully down the slope, edging around toward what appeared to be a section of farmland lying fallow. He could do the least damage by approaching the city center from there.

Even as he did so, a familiar tingling started on his skin.

"No, no...! He repressed the shout. There wasn't a thing he could do. The ten-minute time period was up and the automatics were bringing him inexorably back to the *Enterprise*. And then he had a moment to consider a horrifying thought.

Was this pattern the one the transporter computer would retain? Or would he be rematerialized back aboard ship in his smaller size?

Too late to stop the action, too late to change, too late to worry. His vision blurred; he felt a second of total disorientation and nausea, and then the tingling left him and his vision returned. He was back on board.

Kirk looked down at himself, around the room. He was still his proper size. He stepped off the disk, danced around urgently.

"Scotty, Spock..." No answer, no gratified replies. Maybe they could not shout this far.

Moving rapidly to the transporter console, he examined the place where the crew of straining wire-pullers sad pole-handlers had worked alongside the first officer and chief engineer only ten minutes before. No sign of them.

He took a moment to examine the whisker-thin wire still looped around the transporter lever, marveling from a new perspective at the ingenuity of Scott and his assistants. Dropping to all fours he commenced a detailed survey of the area, but found no sign of the crew.

Surely they could not have shrunken to microscopic size! That would be far beyond Spock's projected lower limit of a sixteenth of a centimeter.

Knowing the automatics would return him, they had probably gone to another part of the ship in need of their attention. The bridge, for example. He got to his feet.

After covering kilometers of scaled-down corridor, it was a pleasure to make it to the bridge at what seemed ike superhuman speed. The door was still locked open, the metal plate still taped over the sensor.

A quick look showed all panels and instrument consoles still operating. Impulse power was still keeping the basic functions of the ship operational, then. But still no sign of any of the crew.

There was plenty of evidence of their activities, though. Discarded remote handler poles, wires running to dials and levers, doubled-over cables attached to other controls in the

same fashion used to manipulate the transporter lever, tiny ladders and stilts made of metal bands.

But an uncanny silence. Clicks and snaps of relays going over. The hum of still-powered machinery. And - he strained to hear it - something more?

High-pitched, barely audible, like the mewing of a small kitten tacked away in a drawer somewhere. Bending, he tried to follow the sound, finally saw the line of ant-sized figures emerging from behind one edge of the helm console.

Dropping to hands and knees, he looked closer. The figures took on familiar shapes and forms and even individual features. But they were so *tiny*, so incredibly tiny.

"Scotty, is that you?"

Scott was staring upward, past the towering peninsulas of Kirk's fingers, up into the monolith of his overhanging face. It hung in the sky like a great pink thundercloud.

He cupped his hands and shouted, "Aye, Captain, for the love of heaven, be careful where you step!"

Kirk nodded slowly, then dropped his face to the floor in an attempt to get as close as possible to eye level with his miniaturized crew. Scott and the others backed up nervously. It was like a mountain falling.

"IS EVERYONE SAFE?"

Scott staggered backward, hands clapped to his ears. "Easy Captain, you'll deafen us for sure."

Kirk dropped his voice to what he thought was a bare whisper. To the shrunken crew his voice still sounded like distant thunder. "Everyone accounted for?"

"All but the regular bridge complement, Captain!" Scott yelled back. "They were all at their posts, when according to the ensign who witnessed it, they were suddenly beamed away.

Every living one of them. That's why I moved my people up here, to keep things runnin'.

"No warnin', no indication of what was comin' - and not a blessed hint of what did it! Only that something was using standard transporter technology."

That was the end, the final assassin of somnolent diplomacy. Now they would not deal so amiably with the inhabitants of the miniature city. Considering their attitude toward the *Enterprise* thus far, Kirk didn't think their treatment of the captured bridge staff would be very benign. Sulu would get his wish, if he were still alive.

Kirk put the tail end of that thought out of his mind.

Turning his head, he had another look at the main viewscreen. He could still see the same quadrant of tortured surface seething below. Transporter records would show precisely where he had been set down. He could pinpoint the city easily. He whispered downward again.

"All personnel away from the helm area. Move to the far bulkhead. I don't know if those people down there - I think I flatter them - have any kind of defense other than their compaction beam, but they might have a more physical way of jolting us. I'd hate to fall an anybody."

As the crew moved at top speed, with infinite slowness, to scatter across the floor, Kirk got to his feet and walked to the helm. His gaze went to certain boldly marked controls - controls which the now-vanished Sulu had pleaded to use before.

Kirk set the phaser control thoughtfully, pressed a couple of attendant switches, read the results of his request on the appropriate gauge.

Yes, the phasers were lined on his desired region. Yes, they still retained enough impulse power for a couple of mild bursts. But that was all it would take to melt the jewel-like little metropolis with its belligerent inhabitants into a shining puddle of metal slag.

Anyone else in Kirk's position might have done that immediately, on the chance of being whisked from the bridge by some irresistible transporter effect himself. Anyone else might, but *they* would not have been a starship captain.

Kirk's anger was moderated by one overriding factor - the chance that Sulu and the others might still be alive somewhere in that honeycomb of towers and roadways.

With the phaser controls set, he moved to Uhura's communications console, checking to make sure Scott and his companions were far from his path between there and the helm. After a second's thought, he selected the general interspecies frequency, composed his thoughts, and addressed himself to the pickup.

"Message to the inhabitants of the city on the planet below. I hope you can receive this frequency and understand my words. Your continued survival depends on it" He paused, gave any listener a chance to fine tune.

"All this ship's armament is locked in on the coordinates of your city. In case you doubt our ability to operate effectively, I've timed a demonstration." He checked his wrist chronometer, counted seconds, looked up at the screen.

The brilliant beam of the secondary phaser bank vanished into atmosphere. On the surface, another steep-walled valley appeared in the ground alongside the one which held the city. Reduced in strength as it was to a trickle of its usual self, the beam was still powerful enough to annihilate the entire city at one touch. The illumined towers and gilded rectangles trembled slightly from a new, artificial quake.

Kirk turned back to the pickup. "You have one minute to restore my bridge crew unharmed or you will receive a full barrage from my ship's armament."

Opening the speakers and setting part of the instrumentation to *Receive*, he moved back to the phaser controls, set one switch, and put his finger on the fire button. He had reversed the field effect in the fluid switch. Now, if he took his finger

off the button - if he were suddenly beamed away - the phaser would fire.

He considered the possibility of destroying an entire city. He found it impossible to be objective, yet the situation had come to the point where someone below had to make the ultimate decision. It was no longer his responsibility. He told himself that, repeatedly. Sulu, Uhura, Arex, Spock - all might be dead already.

A glance at his wrist. Half a minute gone, forty seconds - and then a rapid series of high beeps and sputters filled the bridge, pouring over the main speakers. On the main viewscreen the image of the surface fluttered, was consumed by static, and then suddenly sharpened

Kirk saw the interior of a huge room - huge on the screen - with a vaulting roof soaring far overhead. Highly intricate machinery was set nearby, and tunic-clad creatures were clustered around it.

One of the beings stepped suddenly into the visual pickup from the left side, blocking out most of the view behind. Kirk thought he had seen enough aliens to be prepared for the sight of almost any creature imaginable - any creature unimaginable.

This was unimaginable and shocking. Overpowering.

The alien was male, tall by the standards of its people, vigorous-looking and topped with gray hair. If it resembled anything Kirk had seen before, it was his own father.

Gulliver had been right all along - only his geography was inaccurate.

Kirk underwent some localized tremors of his own as he tried to readjust his thinking.

The man spoke in a high-pitched but nonetheless impressive voice, a voice filled with a dignity and earnestness that bespoke long experience as a leader of men living in desperate circumstances.

"In the name of the Terratin people," he said formally, "I forbid you to take offensive action against this city, Captain Kirk."

Kirk spoke into the helm pickup mike, trying to put as much sarcasm into his voice as possible. "You forbid me, after what you've done to my ship and to my friends?"

"I am Mandant of all this city," the figure told him with assurance, "superior in command to yourself."

"Sorry," Kirk informed the speaker grimly, his finger quivering on the fatal button, "Mandant is not a recognized Starfleet rank."

At this point the leader's tone softened noticeably.

"We are a people of considerable pride, Captain. Equal in pride to your own. We neither suffer insult, nor give apology, for actions we deem necessary, but...," and here he hesitated, obviously struggling with himself to find the words for something he was quite unused to saying, "I give apologies now for the inconvenience done your ship and crew."

Inconvenience!

"To make amends I may tell you that this world contains..."

"I'm not interested in what your world contains just now," Kirk replied angrily. "Where are Mr. Spock, Lieutenant Sulu, and the rest of my officers?"

"I order...," the Mandant began and then he stopped, glanced away. "No ... no. Not order. Please try to understand, Captain Kirk. Our adopted world is dying, has been dying for many years. No ship of an intelligent race had passed this way until yours came exploring.

"We tried to tell you of our plight as you entered orbit, but our great communications antenna was buried too deep by sequential flows of lava and ash. We were, we are, desperate, Captain. We *had* to make some kind of contact with you. The only device we had remaining to us which conceivably could

have made you take notice was our invasion defense system, and..."

"You still haven't answered my question," Kirk interrupted him. "Either you tell me what's happened to my people..."

The Mandant abruptly moved aside ... to reveal a healthy Sulu and Arex. Both were carrying tools of unfamiliar design, yet vaguely familiar in outline. Neither showed any sign of mistreatment.

"Here we are, Captain." Arex speaking, normal, relaxed.

"We're in the capitol building of the Terratin city, sir," Sulu explained. "As you've probably guessed, they beamed us down with their transporters."

Now why didn't they just do that in the first place? Kirk found the answer immediately after the thought occurred. If the Terratins had tried to make contact by transporting down members of the *Enterprise*, even one person would have obliterated not only the transport station but probably half the city as well.

That's why they had to use their invasion defense system first, to reduce the crew sufficiently in size to where they could be brought into the city.

Kirk wondered if the Terratin engineers knew that the crew members would return to their normal size once transported back to the *Enterprise*. That was a question best side-stepped for the moment. The important thing was that Sulu and the others were all right.

But he didn't let himself relax until he had reset the phaser controls to normal and lifted his finger from the red button.

"What's going on down there, Lieutenant Sulu?"

"See for yourself, sir." He stepped out of view, favoring his injured leg. Arex and the Mandant did likewise.

As the pickup panned the great hall, Kirk saw McCoy and Chapel tending to a mass of people scattered on beds about the chamber. The room was jacked to overflowing with people. Normal, human-type people, except for their size. Many of them appeared to be burn victims. Kirk rubbed idly at a hole on the shoulder of his own shirt where one of the flying embers had burned through. He did not need to be told what the sufferers in that hall ware experiencing.

Even as he watched, the picture shook visibly and the people in the building reacted to the new quake. There was no panic, however, only a few gasps and the shushing of crying children. These people were used to such shocks by now, if not resigned to them.

Panning further, the pickup finally settled on Spock. The science officer was working with several Terratins. They appeared to be struggling to repair what resembled a video-broadcast unit of extremely ancient design. His anxiety over the condition of his companions now satisfied, Kirk permitted his curiosity full flow.

"Mr. Spock!" The first officer looked up. "Who are the Terratins? Where did they come from?"

The first officer of the *Enterprise* spoke toward the screen. Kirk could hear him clearly.

"An intriguing historical sidelight, Captain," he began, with typically scholarly reserve. "From the records I have had time to examine, they appear to be the descendants of an early lost colony ship. They are, despite differences in size, of the same Terran stock as yourself.

"Believing their colony to be the tenth to be founded, they named this world Terra Ten - which over the years has become the present corrupted form, Terra-tin."

"All very plausible, Mr. Spock, except for that slight difference in size. I doubt we would find any records of Earth ships carrying colonists a sixteenth of a centimeter tall."

"The original colonists were normal-sized humans," Spook continued. "The remarkable radiation which they have incorporated into their unique defensive system is present naturally in a transuranic element quite common on the surface here. This defensive system intensifies the compaction effect of that radiation tremendously.

"The naturally present wave effect took several hundred years to reduce the colonists and their descendants to their present size. Once aware of what was happening, they were able, as were we, to predict the ultimate dimensions of the compaction. And to plan far in advance for it, designing all the miniature machines and devices they would need for survival."

Suddenly the Mandant reappeared on the screen, now standing beside Spock. "The colony ship was well equipped, Captain. But even with many years to prepare for this, our current state, our ancestors were forced to direct all their energies to insure their descendants' survival.

"In concentrating on survival technology, many other abilities were lost or degenerated - our ability to build deep-space communications equipment, for example. Nor could we escape, since the material inherent in a colony ship's construction is designed to be incorporated into the colony itself. Colony vessels were designed for one-way trips only. Once our ancestors began to cannibalize it for material for the first city, there was no hope of using it for travel again.

"We had to build a new way of life on this world, Captain Kirk. We had to adjust to our changing size, create a new form of defense against any potential attackers, master this planet's unstable ways. We encountered no outsiders, had no help of anyone." The screen shook again, more violently this time. When the shaking had stopped and the cries of the children in the hall had faded once more the Mandant continued, his voice growing thick with emotion.

"But as you now see, Captain, we are forced to seek outside help, for we are about to lose everything. The geologists of the original colony selected what they believed to be one of the most seismically stable regions on the surface. Yet even

here we were never wholly immune to quakes and tremors. Their intensity has grown alarmingly in recent months.

"We began to hunt frantically for outside aid. And we began to despair of contacting another vessel. When your *Enterprise* went into orbit here we were hysterical with hope, despite the earlier destruction of our communications system. We are only able to contact you now," he made a gesture off screen to his left, "due to the knowledge of your Mr. Spock.

"We had to contact you and request if we could, compel if we must, your help. Many thousands look to me to preserve their lives, Captain Kirk. Even so, I hesitated before ordering the defense system brought into play. I apologize again if in gaining your attention we caused any anguish to you or your crew."

"Your actions all but lost us our ship," Kirk responded, his tone turning milder even as he spoke the words. "If I hadn't accidentally discovered that our transporters could return us to normal size, we would have lost total control of the *Enterprise*. That would have been the end of us and any help we could have given you."

"Again, I am sorry, Captain Kirk," the Mandant replied, torn between natural pride and the utter desperateness of his situation, "if in gaining your attention we utilized the first rule of politics - do that which is expedient rather than that which may be right. Really, we had no other choice." He paused, and all traces of arrogance vanished in a naked plea.

"I do not know how to beg, Captain Kirk. I can therefore only request, ask you to save as many of my people as you can. My counselors and I decided to use our defensive system to contact you. If you bear any grudge against us, we will submit whatever judgment you deem fit.

"In any case, we of course insist on being the last to be taken off."

"Don't be idiotic," Kirk found himself mumbling. He was vaguely aware that the Mandant was manipulating his

emotions with a skill born of long practice, but somehow it didn't seem to matter. Not with the lives of a city at stake.

Uhura had entered the field of visual pickup and was looking out at Kirk. "They had no other way left to them, sir. They meant us no harm."

Kirk had already arrived at that opinion independently. But there were other things that had to be done first, no matter how it made him look to the anxious Terratins.

"I can help no one under present conditions," he told the Mandant, staring firmly into the pickup. "I can't run the *Enterprise* myself. All bridge crew, prepare to beam aboard. See to it, Lieutenant." She nodded, disappeared from the screen.

"Oh ... and Uhura?" Her face reappeared. "The Terratins are a Earth colony. That means they have Federation or at least pre-Federation technology. Is their city by any chance powered by...?"

"Dilithium, Captain?" The communications officer smiled. "Lieutenant Arex has already checked on that. It sure is, Captain." Kirk allowed himself to mirror her grin.

"Mandant, are you still there?" The leader of the Terratin colony reappeared a moment later.

"Yes, Captain Kirk. This difficulty, at least, has been anticipated. Your officers informed us of your difficulty in this regard. This world contains substantial deposits of dilithium. The natural wave radiation here is not strong enough to affect its internal structure in the way our defensive beams do. We have a certain amount of refined crystals on hand not essential to the operation of the city. It was this I tried to tell you before.

"My people have been transferring a stock of the largest crystals to a storage area near our main transporter. The move is nearly completed. They will be made available to you for whatever use you require."

"You realize, don't you," Kirk ventured, "that once I have the rest of my bridge crew aboard and the engines repowered, we might easily destroy your defense system and leave you stranded here."

The Mandant looked solemn.

"This is all obvious, Captain Kirk." That was all he said. The directness and openness of his reply made Kirk feel uncomfortable he had even considered such a thought.

"Okay then. Lieutenant Uhura?"

She reappeared on the screen.

"Captain?"

"As long as we retain power I'd just as soon use our own transporters. The Terratin computer has patterns of you only for your present size. As long as you're coming back aboard you may as well do so at the proper size.

"It's going to take me a minute or two to get down to the transporter room. The dilithium crystals are ready to come aboard?"

"Nearly, sir."

"Tell the others to stand by."

"Yes, *sir*!"

He had one bad moment in the transporter room. It looked as if he had misjudged the amount of reserve power remaining and would not have enough to beam them back aboard. But by shutting down all life-support in several unoccupied storage compartments, plus the shuttlecraft hanger, he was able to divert a fair amount to the transporter. It wouldn't run forever, but by the time reserve power ran out they should have the Terratin dilithium aboard and the engines powered up.

Kirk studied the image in the transporter console viewscreen as he prepared to beam the bridge crew up. They were in another chamber of the capitol building. This one was also filled with refugees from the rain of hot ash outside.

The picture jerked a couple of times. Not from a planetary, but from a human-induced tremor, as Terra-tin technicians moved the pickup around. It finally settled on Spock and the rest. They were arranging themselves for beam-up while the Terratins divided huge masses of crystalline dilithium among them.

At least, they appeared huge beside the compacted crew. Actually, they were normal-sized crystals and Kirk knew he could hold the entire amount in one palm.

Terratins driving powered carts continued to arrive with more and more of the vital mineral. Kirk allowed them to heap the crystals around the feet of Uhura, Sulu, and the others until it was overflowing outside the range of transporter pickup.

"That will have to do, Mr. Spock. We can get more the next time. Prepare to beam up."

"Very well, Captain." The first officer turned away for a moment and said something to one of the Terratin technicians. He nodded and backed out of range, but Kirk could hear him speaking to the crowd.

Immediately both colonists and the cart unloaders moved away from the waiting crewmembers. Spock turned to take up his place in the group, stared straight ahead as the Terratins moved their visual pickup further back.

"We're ready, Captain. You may energize at any time."

Kirk worked the transporter controls in proper sequence, his gaze moving constantly from the console to the viewscreen. Familiar sparkling cylinders formed around the crew as the transporter effect took hold. His gaze moved to the empty alcove in front of him as the whine of shifting energies filled the chamber.

The multiple shapes were materializing in the alcove, fullsize, along with irregular clumps at their feet. Dilithium, visible as gravel now instead of boulders. He shifted down, turned a dial, and the effect faded around darkening silhouettes.

"Nice to be back aboard, sir," Uhura murmured with undisguised relief, "and back at one's natural size."

Kirk nodded, spoke quickly. "Everyone watch where you step. We had enough trouble finding this dilithium. Before you move off those disks, gather up those crystals." As they all bent, he turned his attention back to the console, flipped on the ship-wide com.

"All crew personnel report to the main transporter room immediately. Prepare to beam down to the surface. Beam-down and return will bring you back to normal size. Repeat, all crew report to the main transporter room immediately. Move along the walls. Normal-sized personnel will take proper precautions."

Spock came over, both hands cupping the precious load of accumulated dilithium. It looked appallingly small compared to what he had seen on the viewscreen.

"The Terratins are making available every crystal they can spare, Captain. The specimens are small, but I believe they will provide enough power to operate the ship efficiently until we can get a mining crew down to the surface."

Kirk made a sign of agreement, looked past Spock. "Mr. Sulu, take over the transporter, please. Mr. Arex, you will move to B deck to handle transportation problems there. See that Mr. Scott and his engineers are in the first round trip, Sulu." The lieutenant nodded.

"They can handle the rest of the transporting, then," Kirk continued. "As soon as everyone has made the circuit and is restored to proper size, see that Mr. Scott gets a geotech crew down to dig out a sufficient supply of dilithium." He grinned.

"At least we won't have to go prospecting for it. That's another way the Terratins can be of help."

"Excuse me a moment, sir." Sulu was beginning to adjust the transporter controls for the next beam-down ... but slowly. "What about the Terratins? The people in the city are in a state of barely suppressed panic and..."

"You have your orders, Mr. Sulu."

"Yes, sir." All hint of expression disappeared from the lieutenant's face as he turned full attention to the instrumentation.

Kirk took half of the double handful of vital crystals, eyed Spock. "Ever on-loaded an active dilithium reaction chamber by hand, Mr. Spock?"

"No, Captain. But the process is reputed to be failsafe. As I evaluate the steps involved, I foresee only a very small chance of our destroying the ship."

"Thank you, Spock. I can always depend on you for a feeling of security and reassurance. Let's go." Together the two officers started for the elevator doors.

"Slowly, Captain," Spock advised his friend, as Kirk started off at a run from the elevator. "It would be awkward to drop the crystals - or not to see some of our still compacted companions until too late..."

"Don't worry, Spock. I'll choose my steps with as much care as you choose your words." The first officer jogged silently alongside as they neared the door to engineering section marked in bold red characters...

DILITHIUM REACTION CHAMBER - AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY!

VI

His disclaimer of experience notwithstanding, Spock managed the loading of the new supply of raw dilithium into the minutely balanced chamber with all the skill of a reaction specialist - just as Kirk had known he would.

Impulse power was fed to the chamber to spark a greater reaction. A number of gauges on the nearest monitor immediately jumped upward with gratifying speed.

Spock was ready with the results by the time Kirk had re-established life-support and power in the sections he had shut off earlier.

"We will not be able to travel to the nearest starbase, Captain, but essential functions no longer have to be checked as closely and we could break out of orbit at any time.

"And the next load of dilithium should make us fully secure until Scotty and his mining crew can get to work." He let out a sigh of relief, moved to the intercom.

"Mr. Sulu?"

"Main transporter room here, Captain; but it's Third Transporter Engineer Lefebre in charge. Mr. Sulu has returned to the bridge, sir. I was directed to take charge here as soon as I was returned to normal size."

"Carry on, Mr. Lefebre. Is Mr. Scott there?"

"Mr. Scott left some minutes ago for Engineering Central, sir. Said something about working on the engines. He did request that I inform you when you called in that Second Engineer Gabler and a party of five have beamed down to the surface with appropriate equipment and are already engaged in

extracting an adequate supply of raw dilithium for future needs - under the direction of geologists from the Terratin city."

"Thank you, Lefebre. Kirk out."

"Transporter Central out." Kirk started for the elevator, Spock at his side.

"It appears that we shall soon be fully powered up once more, Captain."

"Yes, Mr. Spock. As soon as we've taken on all the dilithium we'll need, we can leave this place."

Spock raised a questioning brow, but Kirk had moved slightly ahead of him and didn't notice it.

Or if he did, he chose to ignore the suggestion behind it.

The ship's transporter facilities worked overtime for the next several hours, beaming ant-sized humans down to the Terratin city and rematerializing them on board in their normal guise moments later.

The Mandant stood in the crowded chamber, watching humans come and go via transporter. Now and then he leaned to confer with one of his aides or to eye the visual linkup which had been hastily set up in the room.

It showed several views of the city outskirts, now menaced from three directions by abysses and crevices which grew with even the slightest of tremors. Another screen revealed the interior of the Terratin science center where worried geologists hurried back and forth. They paused only long enough to deliver increasingly desperate reports.

The Mandant acknowledged every report, spoke steadily and reassuringly to his aides ... all the while trying to keep a calming hand on the metropolis itself. The macropsychosis of the city was fast approaching chaos proportions.

Already a mob was forming outside, threatening to storm the hall and hold the next group of aliens who beamed down as hostages until guaranteed rescue was effected. What kind of rescue was not specified, but that made the demonstrators no less virulent in their demands.

The Mandant smiled sadly to himself. Such people would always exist, never to be calmed, never to be satisfied.

We exist for such a minute time, he mused. We perform a great many inconsequential nothings and call them Acts of Significance, realizing the futility of our lies all the while. Yet we constantly strive for the postponement of the inevitable end which would bring peace to all. Such is the nature of man, and it does not change with his physical stature.

For himself it mattered not what the captain of the starship chose to do. For the young adults and children it mattered a great deal. Some of his aides still had confidence in the remnants of their defensive system. The Mandant knew better. Now that the location of their city was known, they were completely helpless.

Their eventual fate depended on the whim of a man whose ship and command they had nearly destroyed for their own need. Even so, if he were forced to go back he felt he would be compelled to do everything exactly as it had been done before.

But while he could control his fear of death he still had a responsibility to the people.

So when the next group of crewmen appeared in the room, he moved rapidly to stand next to them before the transporter took hold and asked, "Please inform your captain that the reports from our remote seismic research stations are very discouraging. It is apparent now that the former stability of this area is fast diminishing. We doubt we can survive continued quakes much longer without some form of aid.

"Our entire pity is constructed on an interlocking series of precision bearings and gimbals mounted in a viscous fluid. These serve to keep us upright and steady despite the

severity of successive jolts. Though we are rocked a little from time to time, as your fellow crew members can attest.

"But while we can withstand the most violent shakings we cannot withstand the peril that faces us now. A number of enormous - by our measurements - cracks in the ground are forming outside the city ... and are expanding with each new quake. According to predictions from our science center, they will undercut the city in a very short time and drop us to our doom.

"Your captain must tell us - shall we prepare to be rescued, all or part of us? Or to die - all or part of us."

The young yeoman who stood nearest looked back at the Mandant with wide eyes. "I don't know, sir, but...." The air began to glow around him. "I think I have a pretty good idea what Captain Kirk's decision will..."

His words were cut off as the transporter energies surged around him and stole him from sight.

Kirk glanced at his wrist chronometer again before turning his attention back to the gauges, dials and readouts he was inspecting in his walk around the bridge. The *Enterprise* was back to battle efficiency again - fully manned and fully powered.

More than fully powered. If the dilithium Gabler's hastily improvised crew had brought back was anything less than a mother lode, the Terratin world might one day become a major source of that fabulously valuable material. Though he doubted it would ever be much of a colony world.

"How's the helm now, Mr. Sulu," he asked.

The lieutenant looked back at Kirk. "Fully responsive, sir. All instrumentation appears normal once again. All readings are up to red-alert capabilities."

"Subspace radio now operational too, sir," Uhura put in from over at communications. "I have had contact with Star Base

Twenty-three and have informed them of the situation prevailing here. They are recording currently."

"Very good, Lieutenant. You might also relay to them tapes of everything that has taken place in the past twenty-four hours."

"Yes, Captain." Uhura turned back to her mike, began talking into it low and steady.

Kirk heard the elevator door hum, turned to see Scott step onto the bridge. All questions about the state of the ship's engines were answered by the broad smile on the chief engineer's face.

"The last of the crew has been through the double transporter trip, sir. Everythin' runnin' smooth as a mother's lullaby. To look at the power levels you'd think we'd never had any trouble here."

"Almost, Mr. Scott." There was one last problem to be dealt with. He turned to face the helm. "Mr. Arex, prepare ship for immediate departure from this region."

Arex looked ready to say something but another listener beat him to it.

"I beg your pardon, Captain."

Kirk turned to the science station. Spock was staring at him evenly. His voice was a monotone. "What about the people on the planet?"

"I haven't forgotten them, Mr. Spock. I know exactly what to do. I thought about it while the rest of the crew were beaming up. It's the only thing that can be done." He looked to the helm.

"Mr. Sulu, direct forward phasers to the region of the Terratin city."

"Captain, I..."

Kirk moved to stand next to him, smiled reassuringly. "It's all right, Mr. Sulu. We'll require pinpoint fire control. There are some precision adjustments necessary - but believe me, this is the best way."

Using the computer linkup to phaser control, he proceeded to trace with the electronic stylus a certain pattern of fire on the targeting screen. Behind them, Uhura, Scott and Spock had all turned from their responsibilities of the moment to watch. All but Arex, who continued with his part of the preparations for leaving the area. Of all of them, only he had some idea of what Kirk was going to try.

"Can you handle that, Mr. Sulu?" he asked when he'd finished with the computations. The helmsman studied the carefully wrought fire pattern and nodded slowly.

"I'm sure I can, sir. I would like to incorporate a fail-safe into it, if I might."

"No time, Mr. Sulu," Kirk objected firmly. "We'll have to do it right on the first try. Those people down there must not be made to suffer any longer."

"Very well, Captain," Sulu acquiesced. He turned and commenced programming the phaser control computer. Once he stopped, to request some information from Spock. When that was granted, Scott and Uhura grew more curious than ever - since Spock now appeared to know what was going on, too.

Neither dared interrupt what was clearly a harried operation. But when Spock was finished relaying Sulu's needed statistics, Scott moved to stand next to the first officer.

"For the love of Loch Lomond, what's happenin', Mr. Spock? What's the captain up to?"

Spock turned unblinking eyes on him. "Nothing more than what the captain has already stated, Mr. Scott, though I confess to having been somewhat mystified as to his intentions at first, myself." He turned back to his console. "I

suppose one might describe it by saying we are about to embark on a program of long-range geologic dentistry."

Scott mulled this over a moment and then his face twisted into a quizzical expression. "There are some people down there I think I could grow fond of, Mr. Spock, from what I've seen of them. Don't play word games with me."

"We are attempting an extraction, Mr. Scott," Spock elucidated.

"An extraction?"

"Only instead of removing the infected region from the healthy, the captain is simply reversing the process."

Scott's expression of uncertainty lasted only long enough for a few seconds concentrated thought ... and then his face settled into a pleased highland grin as the truth was revealed.

On the west side of the city two yawning crevices - soil-sided, rock-toothed - pierced the outlying farmland. The atmosphere behind the tiny gilt spires and soaring steel buttresses had turned orange with the burning hills in the distance. Thunder rattled the valley and sharp slivers of blue flame broke through the orange at distant intervals.

The continued existence of intelligent life on this world was becoming impossible.

"Now, Kyle!" Kirk yelled into the intercom. Long pause while everyone held his breath and waited - until Transporter Chief Kyle's voice sounded over the com. with an air of exhausted accomplishment.

"Got 'em, Captain."

"Are you sure, Kyle?"

"Aye, sir. It took a helluva lot of power for so broad a subject, but we're holding."

"Outstanding, Mr. Kyle. I'm on my way down. Hold it in stasis until we get there, just in case."

"Will do, sir."

Kirk and Spock hurried from the bridge. They moved impatiently through elevators, down corridors, heading for the bulk transporter room near the Shuttle Bay.

Minutes later they were standing beside Chief Kyle, staring at the considerable object which had appeared in the cavernous chamber. It was the Terratin city, neatly sliced from the planet's surface.

The city proper rested on about a half meter of crystalline bedrock, it's gimbal-bearing support system buried within and keeping it steady as always.

An astonishingly efficient system, Kirk mused, which when increased in size and adapted to other Federation colonies on active worlds would save thousands, perhaps millions of lives.

At the moment, the city was still enveloped in the shifting spectral phosphorescence of the transporter effect.

"Set it down, Chief."

"Aye, sir," Kyle replied. He activated the necessary instrumentation, pushed slowly up on a certain lever. The three men watched as the fairyland of towers and domes materialized on the deck. The city, complete to farmlands and forest belt, fitted neatly into the chamber.

If the city had appeared unusual on the surface, Kirk reflected, here on board it was thoroughly unreal. Unreally beautiful, too. No, he wasn't worried about the Terratins finding a useful niche in Federation society. Any people who could construct a habitation of pure loveliness under the incredible stresses imposed by the world below would contribute more than their share to any society they joined.

If anything, their participation in Federation affairs would be outsized.

He took a couple of steps closer, peering into the depths of the transported metropolis and wishing he could see and hear the inhabitants clearly. Spock again proved himself open to suspicion of mind-reading - or perhaps clairvoyance!

"I took the liberty of having this made up in bioengineering as soon as I divined your intentions toward the Terratins, Captain." Kirk turned and saw that Spock was bringing a large device out from behind the transporter console. It looked very much like a telescope pointing the wrong way. It was all of that - and a good deal more.

There seemed to be a great deal of activity around the open platform which girdled the tallest tower in the city. Kirk helped Spock aim the narrower end of the device toward it.

"Speak normally, Captain. The instrument will project and mollify your tones simultaneously." Kirk cleared his throat, adjusted the focus on the visual. One of the people on the platform looked familiar, though more composed than Kirk remembered him - which was understandable.

"Mandant?" The figure smiled, nodded. "We welcome your people on board the *Enterprise*."

The leader of the Terratin colony stared up at the monstrous machine. Behind him, his counselors and aides grew gradually less timid, moved out to stare up in their turn, look 'round in wonderment. To look at the Mandant, you would have thought he traveled with his city by starship at least once a year. A very cool individual, Kirk thought. He had no more worries about the Terratins' ability to handle themselves in Federation politics.

"Captain Kirk, we welcome your eye upon our city and hope you find it fair."

"I would tend to say stunning rather than fair, Mandant," Kirk responded honestly. "Right now it's about the most gorgeous thing on the *Enterprise*. Much as I hate to lose you, I'll have to admit my ship's not a sufficient setting for it."

"What do you have planned for us then, Captain?"

"There is a small world named Verdanis in a system ten days' cruising from here, Mandant. Verdanis is a lush world, much like Earth itself, but devoid of an animal life. It is also about the size of the solarian asteroid Ceres. Too small and too far away to support a normal colony, but I think more than sufficient for your people. Under Federation protection I think you will thrive and grow there - in a relative sense, of course."

The Mandant smiled back at him. "It sounds idyllic, Captain. I do not know how to begin to thank you."

"Thanks are not in order, Mandant. However, it may please you to know that while your adopted world will never support a large population, it looks to become a mining world of considerable importance for its dilithium deposits alone."

"The rescue of a portion of our population was all we could ever hope for, Captain Kirk. To be saved such, with our homes and city too, and then to be given a new, friendlier world, is beyond prayer."

Someone whispered in his ear - one of the aides - and the Mandant paused to listen to him. He turned and appeared to engage in conversation with several of the counselors.

When he turned back to Kirk, the counselors could be seen smiling in the background.

"I believe it is appropriate for me to make a very short speech, Captain." Kirk waited quietly. "People of the *Enterprise*," the Mandant intoned importantly, "we have no way we can possibly pay the debt we owe you. But this one little thing we can give, and upon this one thing we are all agreed." He gestured around, his arms taking in the city surrounding him. "We name you all honorary Terratins, now and for all time to come."

"A singular honor," observed Spock drily, "insofar as we came rather close to making it more than merely an honorary tide." Kirk looked away from the eye piece.

"Somewhere along the lines of one sixteenth of a centimeter close?"

"I would say about that, Captain." Kirk grinned back at him.

***

Maximum attention was paid to the Terratins as the ship moved towards Verdanis. Once Starfleet deciphered the first reports on the lost miniature colony, a flood of requests for information kept Uhura and M'ress bound to the communications console.

A missing link in Federation prehistory was filled in as the ship's historian took tape after tape from the city's miniscule library stacks. Ship geologists spent days in conference with their bug-sized brothers discussing living under constant quake conditions. And all the engineers marveled over the construction of the city itself, with particular marveling reserved for the remarkable Terratin city gimbal support system. Nothing like it existed anywhere in the Federation.

There was a brief ceremony of departure when the *Enterprise* went into orbit around Verdanis. The world was officially renamed Verdantin, good wishes were exchanged, formalities of possession signed, and then the city was transported down onto a broad plain filled with miniature streams and - to the Terratins - Sequoia-sized fungi.

"What do you think will become of them, Jim?" McCoy wondered. He was staring at the main viewscreen, which showed the city nestled in among the towering vegetation. A nearby pond formed a broad lake at the far end of the transplanted metropolis.

"Their location will be on public file with Starfleet Central, of course. Eventually it will become common knowledge throughout the Federation. But from what I've seen I don't think the Terratins will be satisfied with protectorate status for very long. They'll want full membership. That means trade, the exchange of ideas and material. With first settlement rights to their original home planet - and its mineral wealth - they'll wield considerable financial clout."

"That's fine for the immediate future, of course ... but what of the day after tomorrow?"

Kirk looked over from the command chair, considered. "One's tempted to say they'd be in trouble, Bones, but I think not. You should hear what the engineering people are saying about some of their quake-resistant machinery. It looks as if they're going to become a much sought-after group. Some of their techniques and references are badly dated, but skill and ability do not go out of fashion." He returned his attention to the screen.

"Why, I'd be willing to predict for openers that when population controls are released, Verdantin is going to become one of the biggest exporters of precision machinery in the Federation." He looked at his wrist and smiled.

"Do you know, Bones, that the Mandant and some of his counselors wear wrist chronometers every bit as accurate as the one I'm wearing? It takes a forty-five-hundred credit instrument under the control of a master timemaker nearly an hour to properly adjust the timing pin where it sets into the vibrating crystal. One of the Terratin engineers fixed it for me before the city was transported down ... in a couple of minutes.

"Do you know what precision, super-miniaturized tool he used, Bones?" He eyed the doctor challengingly. "A crowbar."

"I see what you're driving at," Bones confessed, suddenly excited. "In fact, I begin to see some possibilities myself. Damn! If I'd only spent some time with their best surgeons, instead of setting bones and treating burns...!" He was thinking furiously.

"I wonder, Jim ... do you suppose some of the Terratin doctors might consider a little experimental surgery ... wearing diving suits?"

Kirk didn't comment, but McCoy rambled on, his voice taking on a reverent tone.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful, Jim, if we could perform heart operations as an inside job...?"

THE TIME TRAP

(Adapted from a script from Joyce Perry)

I

Kirk tossed uneasily in his sleep. Strange, unknown energies were buffeting the *Enterprise*. No matter what maneuver, no matter what speed, no matter what attitude change he ordered, she seemed unable to break the grasp of the malignant invisibility.

Around them, space was solidifying, tangible tendrils and fingers and ropy tentacles materializing out of the black depths. All reaching out, out, for the ship.

An inky pseudopod looped itself tightly around an unsuspecting engineer. A long finger folded crookedly over the bridge itself, while somewhere in the distant well of infinity a mad voice giggled.

He ordered full phaser fire, but the beams simply assaulted space itself, the ravening fire passing harmlessly through semisolid members. The *Enterprise* rolled, pitched, shook, unable to loosen the slowly contracting grip of those gigantic digits.

Two of them entered the bridge, one from either wall. They started to move toward each other. Kirk, frozen in his command chair, was in the exact middle. Someone screamed. He tried to rise from the chair and discovered he couldn't.

The black thumbs moved nearer and nearer, closing off his view of the rest of the bridge, blotting out Spock and Uhura and Arex and Sulu and the main viewscreen and the phaser controls and the black cat slinking along the deck. Spock and the others had shown no sign, no awareness, of approaching oblivion.

Didn't they see? Couldn't they feel the massive claws flowing in upon them like black glaciers to crush and squeeze and pinch? He tried to call to Spock but seemed to have lost his voice along with his mobility.

All ignored him as he tried to shout; all went about their usual tasks as the life was taken from them. Only Bones turned, once. Incredibly, his gaze went right through Kirk as if he weren't there.

The black fingers tensed tighter. The harder he struggled, the more firmly rooted he was in the chair.

And all the while the ship continued to shake as dozens of other cyclopean tendrils and fingers pulled and wrenched at it. No one paid the least attention. Pressing hard now the fingers dug in. Now they were at his very shoulders, squeezing, pressing tighter and tighter. Compression started a ringing in his ears and he felt pressure on both sides of his head.

Ringing ... a mocking, insistent ringing that grew and grew as he tried to shut it out. Struggled to shut it out. Fought to shut it out

And failed.

He shot to a sitting position in bed, hands behind him, eyes wide and unwinking - instantly wide awake. Then he slumped ever so slightly and ran a hand across his forehead. He rubbed at both eyes, but the buzzing and ringing didn't go away. Instead, they were transformed into a steady, almost familiar hum. It pulled at his attention insistently.

Thought ... he turned, saw the winking red light set over his bunk. Pressed the acknowledge button. At the same time a strong tremor jolted the covers around him.

"Kirk here."

"I think you had better come forward, Captain. We have just impacted the perimeter of the Delta Triangle. As you can tell from the recent shake, things are beginning to happen already."

"All right, Mr. Spock." He paused while another, more violent vibration rattled his living quarters. "I'll be forward in five minutes."

He dressed rapidly. His mind raced as he hurried toward the bridge.

Following the establishment of the lost Terratin colony on the tiny world of Verdantin, the *Enterprise* had received orders to proceed to the Delta Triangle. The order had been transmitted and accepted with a quiet assurance at both ends of the transmission that neither broadcaster nor receiver felt.

There were too many unanswered questions about the Delta Triangle, none of them inspiring to a starship captain.

Kirk leaned against a corridor wall as yet another jolt shook the *Enterprise*. Noticing the uneasy, almost frightened look of two young yeomen who were walking the opposite way, he smiled confidently at them as he passed. Their incipient fears vanished, but not his own.

The Delta Triangle had a reputation that was well known. It was a vast, uninhabited, unexplored sector of the galaxy in the outer reaches of the Federation's influence. Its reputation stemmed from the number of disappearances occurring there of both manned and unmanned starships. Some dated from ancient times. Nor were they all Federation ships. Whatever was responsible for the multitude of disappearances made no distinctions as to race or region.

For awhile it had been enough simply to prohibit ships from entering the area. Nonetheless some persisted. Miners, traders, religious fanatics - the Delta Triangle was an irresistible magnet for them all.

Sometimes they came out, unharmed and having seen or found nothing. Often they disappeared, without a message, without a trace.

Now the expanding Federation found its frontiers pressing hard against the Delta Triangle. Should they avoid it and grow

only in other directions? Or were there worlds within worth exploring... and exploiting?

Starfleet Command studied, thought, considered the problem. They decided the time had come to risk s full-scale exploration of the sector with a major research vessel. That meant a ship of the *Enterprise*'s class.

That meant, specifically, the *Enterprise*.

The alarm lights were flashing to suitable aural accompaniment as he stalked onto the bridge. His first glance was for the helm navigation console, where Sulu and Arex were working frantically. Moving near, he peered over the Edoan's shoulder.

An area roughly triangular in shape was projected on the navigation grid. A tiny, regularly-flashing blip sat just inside the bottom edge of the triangle. Neither blip nor triangle were to scale, but it was enough to show how little of the mysterious region they had managed to penetrate.

And trouble already.

Kirk nodded to nobody in particular, turned and took up his position in the command chair. Sulu cut off the alarm lights and sound. Another jolt rocked the ship as the captain took his seat. The jolts were getting stronger. For a second he thought he was back prowling the unsteady surface of the Terratin world

It was time for facts.

"Situation, Mr. Spock?"

Spock spared him a brief glance before returning his attention to the library computer console. He looked more than usually preoccupied with his instruments.

"Indeterminate, Captain. Many of our sensors have become completely unreliable. Some continue to function, while others give readings which are patently impossible. And this

wholesale disruption of detection sensors shows no internal pattern.

"The phenomenon commenced the moment we entered the Triangle sector. I do have one positive external reading, however. A solid object lies directly ahead though it barely registers on the long-range sensors."

Kirk considered this information thoughtfully. "And this object is the source of the instrumentation disruptions, Spock?"

Now the first officer did take the time to look away from his readouts. "That is the odd thing about it, Captain. This newly detected mass appears to have nothing whatsoever to do with the addled sensors. Interesting."

"Very," Kirk agreed. "Has visual identification been tried?"

"Not yet, sir," Sulu volunteered. "The object Mr. Spock refers to has just come within range of our maximum visual scan."

"Let's see if we can't pick it up, then, Lieutenant. Magnification ten on forward scanners."

"Magnification ten, sir," Sulu echoed, working the controls just to the right of the phasers.

Kirk's gaze shifted to the main viewscreen. It showed the speckled blackness of deep space just ahead. Another of the unexplained jolts rocked the ship. The static that momentarily appropriated the screen was of unique and unfamiliar nature.

It sputtered out, leaving a grainy, pebbled picture behind. Despite the lack of clarity, there was no difficulty in identifying the object picked up by Spock's operational detectors.

A Klingon battle cruiser.

It appeared to hang motionless against the distant star-field, hovering against the emptiness like the great bird of prey it was vaguely patterned after, though Kirk knew it was anything but motionless. The scanners compensated for its actual speed.

It was a surprise to see an Imperial Klingon vessel here. The Klingons were not considered to be among the more adventurous races where abnormalities of time and space were concerned. The Delta Triangle was one of the last places Kirk would have expected to encounter them.

Somehow he had a feeling that their presence here was unrelated to neutral exploration.

"Klingon battle cruiser," he announced, his tone becoming brisk. "Deflector shields up, Mr. Sulu."

"All deflectors up, sir."

"Recognize her, Mr. Spock?"

Spock studied the screen. "No, Captain. *Klolode*-class ship, though." Kirk nodded.

"Equivalent to our own." He directed his next order backward. "Lieutenant Uhura, open a hailing frequency and..."

Further conversation was cut off as several pulses of lambent color suddenly erupted from the front of the Klingon ship. The scanners were momentarily blinded. A soft rumbling was heard, and the deck trembled slightly underfoot as the barrage of disruptor bolts impinged on the *Enterprise*'s deflector screens and were repulsed. A moment later the screen cleared, showed the image of the battle cruiser shrinking rapidly with distance.

"Mr. Sulu," Kirk began angrily, "will you...?"

"Following, sir," Sulu said tightly. The helmsman was obviously controlling his voice and emotions with difficulty. Kirk didn't have to ask why.

No doubt the Klingon commander had hoped to catch the *Enterprise* unprepared, her screens down, with that first attack. Seeing that it had failed, he was running now.

The Klingon's logic was not hard to follow. Were the *Enterprise* to disappear in the Delta Triangle, her demise

would be recorded as just another in the age-old series of mysterious disappearances. Clever ... and thoroughly slimy.

"He's running in a high warp arc, Captain," Sulu reported, handling the pursuit course, "but we've got her. She won't get away."

"Plotting confirmed," added Arex in his usual calm, soft tones. No sign in his voice that anything out of the ordinary had occurred.

"Ready phasers," Kirk ordered.

If the Klingon commander expected his surprise attack would go unanswered, he was badly mistaken. Letting such a provocation go would be tantamount to an admission of cowardice. That was something the Klingons would immediately rationalize as *carte blanche* to try similar adventures in other sectors - perhaps against less well defended Federation vessels. If nothing else, a strong response was required as a deterrent to such thoughts.

"Phasers ready - approaching attack range, Captain," Sulu told him. Minutes later, "Phasers locked on target, sir."

Intolerably intense beams of deep blue lit the blackness between the *Enterprise* and the Klingon cruiser that sat squarely in the center of the main viewscreen.

The Klingon had looked normal to Kirk until just before the phasers were fired. Then he had noticed - or thought he had noticed - a peculiar wavering of space around the alien warship. A suggestion of motion where there should have been no motion. A hint of light where light was absent.

Probably a trick of the eyes. In any case, he had no time to consider it. The two bursts from the ship's forward phasers impacted on the Klingon's deflector screens.

One of two things should have happened.

The shields should have flared brilliantly with the strain of absorbing the phaser energy or, if the bursts were strong

enough and contacted the shields at a weak enough point, the ship should have shown damage from the powerful attack. Neither took place.

Instead, the Klingon cruiser vanished.

Not in a burst of incandescent flame, not in a sudden supernal explosion - it just vanished. One second the ship was there, awaiting the counterattack of the *Enterprise* - and then there was only the silence of space in its place, nothing to indicate the cruiser had ever existed.

At least, that's how it appeared to a flabbergasted Kirk.

The first step was outside confirmation of his own observations. His attempt to secure same was not subtle, but had instead the virtue of directness.

"Mr. Spock, did you just see what I think I just saw?"

"Not only did I just see what you think you just saw, Captain, but I am now observing what you think you don't."

"So we concur on analysis if not on grammar. Explanation?"

Spock's attention was divided between the main viewscreen, numerous gauges set above the computer keyboard, and his double-hooded viewer. Several moments of intense study of all three areas produced a reply tinged with the faintest hint of uncertainty.

"I can offer nothing plausible at this time, Captain. However..." Studying yet another new bit of information, he hesitated. "Playback of sensor readings taken just prior to the disappearance of the Klingon ship, when examined at ultraslow speed, indicate that the ship was not destroyed, repeat, not destroyed, by our phaser fire.

"Replay further *implies* that the enemy vessel's shielding was operating at full strength and successfully deflected both phaser bursts though no direct evidence of such shielding was detectable."

Kirk paused a moment, asked, "What about the possibility they're using a variety of the invisibility shield we've encountered before?"

"I do not think so, Captain. That produces definite, detectable reactions, measurable stresses in the fabric of space. Nothing of the sort has been observed."

"*Ummm.*" Kirk thought back to the strange phenomenon he thought he had noticed just before the battle cruiser vanished. "Seconds before we counterattacked, Mr. Spock, I think I saw a certain - well, a kind of fluttering around the Klingon's hull."

"I observed a similar field-effect, Captain," Sulu said excitedly. "I thought it was a distortion in our scanners, an after-effect of the disruptor bolts."

"It is not a distortion, of either our eyes or the scanner's," Spock added. "I saw it, too."

"I'll assume visual confirmation, then," Kirk went on. "We should have a record of the effect, Mr. Spock. Sensor analysis?"

Spock returned to his computer, made demands on recently employed tapes. "The instruments are still not registering with regularity, Captain - a disruption still unaccounted for. But I believe I can say with assurance, after scanning the pertinent information, that the Klingon ship was not in any way responsible for the effect we observed and exercised no control over it.

"As there have been numerous ship disappearances in this region, I would venture the opinion that..."

"Whatever caused the disappearance of the Klingon ship was a natural phenomenon," Kirk concluded. "Clearly the Klingons were expecting it no more than we were. But what kind of natural phenomenon absorbs starships without a trace?" He turned his gaze back to the viewscreen.

"At least we have some idea what to expect ... instant, quiet annihilation. How comforting. All duly personnel, yellow-alert

status."

Sulu touched the necessary switches.

"Give me a three-hundred-sixty-degree visual scan, Mr. Sulu. Horizontal plane first, then forty-five degrees, then vertical."

"Aye, Captain," the helmsman replied, making adjustments. "Scanning three-hundred-sixty-degrees horizontal." The starfield on the screen began to move from right to left as they watched.

The scan was barely a fourth completed when the scanners picked up a new phenomenon. Unlike the odd fluttering that had appeared around the vanished battle cruiser, this one was immediately identifiable. The moving blot could be only one thing.

"Captain, we have another vessel on the screen," Sulu reported. "No, make that a double pickup, sir. Both vessels moving toward us at cruising speed, angle of approach...," and he spat a rapid stream of threatening figures at Kirk.

"Visual pickup holding ... stepping up magnification, sir," the helmsman continued. The image on screen shifted, changed, held.

Two Klingon battle cruisers appeared on the screen now, and they were between the *Enterprise* and her entry point into the Triangle.

Spock had moved over to stand next to the command chair, eyed the screen. Kirk's voice was grim as he studied the pursuing vessels.

"Mousetrapped." He glanced up at his first officer. "If the surprise attack by the first ship doesn't succeed in blasting us out of existence, they have a pair of reserves ready to make sure we don't get away to tell the story."

"Speaking strictly from the standpoint of objective tactics, Spock commented drily, "an excellent idea. They are

apparently most concerned that word of this altercation should never reach Starfleet Central."

"With good reason," Kirk noted. Both men turned to face the communications console as Uhura spoke up.

"Sir, we're receiving a Class Two signal from the nearest Klingon ship. Shall I acknowledge?"

"One moment, Lieutenant." Kirk looked to his helmsman. "Mr. Sulu? On my command, I want you to turn us from our present course and head for the exact coordinates where the Klingon cruiser disappeared. Warp-eight."

"Yes sir." Sulu puzzled over the order even as he made the necessary preparations. Sometimes he wished the captain would be a bit more communicative about his intentions. It occasionally seemed to him that the *Enterprise* was governed as much by surprise as by forethought.

"All right, Lieutenant," Kirk told Uhura. "Put the visual on the main screen. And I'll want this entire exchange recorded and beamed back to Starfleet Command." Uhura looked doubtful at this last.

"It will take three weeks to reach the nearest Star-base, sir. And additional time before it can be boosted and relayed to command headquarters."

"Nonetheless, let's have it on the records... provided the Klingons don't try to jam it."

"Aye, sir." She turned back to her board, fiddled a moment. "Signal coming in." The main viewscreen flickered briefly. Then the view of the two Klingon cruisers was replaced by a portrait of a high-ranking Klingon officer.

This particular Klingon was heavy-set and stiff-faced. He also affected a beard and mustache, the latter a thin, drooping kind once favored by Oriental mandarins on ancient Earth. It gave him an especially displeasing appearance. His eyes were impressive, Ms manner standard for a Klingon commander who believed himself to be in a position of incontrovertible

tactical superiority ... blunt, overbearing, irritatingly condescending.

"You have been identified as the Federation Starship *Enterprise*, Captain James T. Kirk commanding at last record." The words came out clipped, accusative.

Kirk shifted slightly hi his chair, making sure the small visual pickup trained on him was giving the Klingon as good a picture of himself as they were receiving. His voice he held carefully neutral.

"Your information is correct This is Captain Kirk speaking."

A grunt of satisfaction, then the Klingon went on. "I am Commander Kuri of the Imperial Klingon fleet. We have just witnessed the destruction of our sister ship, the *Klothos*, and we hold you responsible. Surrender immediately or we will destroy you."

Nothing like getting to the point. Diplomacy figured in Klingon requests about as much as semantic inventiveness ... meaning not at all.

Kirk took a pained breath, hoped Kuri was enough of a reader of human expression to know what it meant; and he continued, his voice tinged with just the proper amount of exasperation.

"We did not destroy the *Klothos* - and you are well aware of it, Commander."

"Surely you don't expect me to believe it just vanished," Kuri replied furiously.

Spock leaned over, still staying out of range of the visual pickup, and whispered, "The Klingons are not good poker players, Captain. From this one's attitude and expression, I would say he is as confused as we are - and not a little bit frightened."

Kirk had no time to consider Spock's observations in detail. He went on sharply. "You may believe what you like, Commander.

We were fired upon first, without warning of any kind. Naturally we returned fire. Our instruments record that the *Klothos* successfully turned back our phaser attack ... and then disappeared. I have no more idea than you what caused it.

"But, as you are no doubt aware, we are now in the Delta Triangle. You are familiar with this region's reputation?"

Kuri suddenly seemed unsure of himself. Clearly he had believed the *Enterprise* was responsible for the disappearance of the *Klothos*. Kirk's explanation sounded plausible.

"Yes, certainly, that was why..." He hastily took another tack, aware of what he had almost confessed openly. "I am familiar with the numerous ship disappearances recorded in this sector, yes. But that it should happen now, at such a time, is a coincidence of proportions I am not prepared to accept." He confessed the last in such a way that Kirk couldn't be sure if it was meant for his ears or for those of unseen persons hovering invisibly around them.

Kirk was the only one who responded however. "Frankly, Commander, what you accept is of little concern to me. *Enterprise* out." He flicked a switch in the armchair console which shifted the viewscreen back to external scan. Once more the two battle cruisers dominated the picture.

At the same time he said, "Now, Mr. Sulu."

The Klingon ships vanished as Sulu drew power from the engines. Kirk called for further magnification, but the Klingons had been lost in the starfield. That wouldn't last for long.

The view on the bridge of the lead Klingon cruiser was reversed, where it was the *Enterprise* that seemed to disappear.

"Fools, idiots!" Kuri shouted. "Thinking they can escape." He had already forgotten Kirk's protestation of innocence. It was confession enough that the Federation ship was running. He turned to his own helmsman.

"Accelerate to maximum ... use emergency power if necessary - but *do not let them escape*! Prepare to open fire."

Moving in tandem, both cruisers leaped forward in pursuit of the *Enterprise*. Using emergency power, they sprinted, closing on the Federation craft.

Range had been reduced from excessive to marginal and several minutes had passed when the gunner on board the lead Klingon cruiser looked back at his commander wonderingly.

Kuri was aware of the scrutiny. Undoubtedly the officer was wondering why the order to fire was being withheld. Kuri fully intended to give the order, but he had just the least bit of hesitation, the tiniest touch of uncertainty, at the back of his mind.

He did not know Kirk personally, but he knew both his reputation and the reputation of his ship. It was not like the *Enterprise* to turn and run, no matter what the odds. A quick frontal assault, at least, a passing attempt to damage one of his two remaining ships - but instead, she had turned and run.

Nevertheless, they *were* within range.

"Both ships, fire at will," he ordered, waiting expectantly for the *Enterprise* to do ... what? What if Kirk had been right about the disappearance of the *Klothos* being due to natural phenomena? Might not the same be waiting out there, poised to capture yet another vessel?

Disruptor bolts fled across the intervening space. A feathery nimbus flared repeatedly around the fleeing *Enterprise* as her screens handled the assault.

The steady barrage of disrupters blanked out the rear scanners. Kirk switched to the forward pickups. By now he was more concerned about where they were going than what was behind them.

Scott was working the engineering console on the bridge. He had held off speaking as long as he could. Now he felt it was time to speak up.

"Sir, aren't we going to defend ourselves?"

"Your deflector shields are doing that quite nicely, Mr. Scott." Scott struggled to maintain a respectful attitude. This wasn't like Kirk.

"But sir, just to ... run away, sir. We were attacked ... and there are only two of them left."

The chief engineer might have felt better if he could have seen how Kirk was fighting his own instincts. "We'll turn and fight if we have to, Mr. Scott." He looked to the helm. "Mr. Sulu, are we on course for the exact spot where the *Klothos* disappeared?"

"Dead on, sir," Sulu responded, checking his readouts. "We'll arrive in ... ten seconds. Mark, nine, eight..." He counted down the seconds. At six, Scott whirled from his console to announce in a stunned tone, "Captain, our deflector shields have just gone out."

Sulu commanded his attention before Kirk could reply. "Sir, the helm instrumentation has gone haywire. I can't orient myself."

"Everything is quite abnormal, Captain," Arex added. "None of the navigation readouts are behaving sanely."

"Subspace radio channels are all dead, sir," put in Uhura.

By way of mechanical afterthought, alarm lights began flashing, blinking on the bridge. None of them could see, of course, the gentle shimmering light which had suddenly appeared around the ship.

For several seconds the *Enterprise* lay enveloped in a faint, ghostly halo. Then the halo winked out, and with it, the *Enterprise* - both presumably gone to the same unimaginable, unknown destination.

Not too far away in the relative sense, a senior Klingon officer suddenly jumped halfway out of his seat, staring in disbelief at his main viewscreen. A Federation vessel had been depicted there only seconds before.

"Where did they go? Where did they run to? Navigator!" The officer in question examined his gauges and telltales, looked back helplessly at his commander.

"I do not know, Exalted One. Their ship has vanished from range of every one of our detectors - as did the *Klothos*."

Kuri sat down slowly.

It was not permitted a cruiser commander to appear frightened before his men. However, nothing in the manual of battlefield posture prohibited him from sounding concerned.

"Slow to minimum speed. Spread out, search this area. And remain in contact at all times. The second any abnormal phenomena are detected, both ships are to retreat at battle speed to the perimeter of the Delta Triangle." He turned to his communications officer.

"Keep all hailing channels open." The officer nodded. "Federation and Imperial frequencies." Now there was nothing more he could do.

First the *Klothos* - and now the *Enterprise*. Kirk had been right, then, in his explanation of the *Klothos*' disappearance. Little good it had done him!

Unless ... unless this was another Federation trick. If there was one thing Kuri had learned through the years it was never to underestimate the deviousness of the Federation mind. But he was grasping at *f'korr*. Some gross abnormality of space-time was at work here.

It was time to proceed with the utmost caution.

On the *Enterprise* something had happened to the vision of the bridge crew. Or else something had affected the atmosphere in the room. Whether the thing was in their eyes

or air, it caused everyone to see his neighbor through a faint haze. One couldn't judge distances, discern outlines; and whatever it was made the eyes hurt - and the brain, which had the responsibility of trying to sort out the distorted images and reconcile them with known memories.

No one was having much success. Those who had not fallen from their seats were hanging on for dear life. The sudden displacement was not due to any violent shaking or tumbling, although a weird vibration was running through the metal underfoot and in the hull walls. Rather, everyone was experiencing an abrupt and disquieting loss of balance. Something was causing a gross distortion within familiar surroundings.

Sulu had both arms around the back of his chair and was leaning crazily around one end, staring back in Kirk's general direction.

"Captain, coordination's gone ... dizzy."

Even Spock spoke without his usual assurance. "Captain, we appear to be suffering from a sensation akin to mass vertigo. Remarkable."

"Sulu," Kirk managed to mumble, "are we still locked into the same course?" The effort to concentrate on the weaving outline of the helmsman was making him feel sick. Somehow he controlled it.

"I can't tell, sir," was Sulu's reply. "I can't read the instruments clearly. They're all running together. Running, blending, and..."

As abruptly as it had begun, the strange haziness abated. Vision and balance returned with unnatural speed. Only the lingering queasiness gave any indication something unusual had happened.

Spock, characteristically, was the first to recover. His gaze was directed not to Kirk or any of the others but to the main viewscreen.

"Captain ... ahead of us."

Still feeling slightly ill, Kirk looked over at his first officer and followed his gaze to the main viewscreen. His first reaction was that somehow the two Klingon battle cruisers might have gotten ahead of them. But that was not the explanation. *Oh, no.*

There were other starships ahead of them, though. Several starships. Dozens of starships. Starships of every age and origin. Starships representing every known civilization - and some unknown.

Some looked so ancient it was difficult to believe they contained even the most rudimentary form of star-drive. Others were sufficiently advanced looking to boggle Scott's mind.

All drifted motionless against an alien starfield, tightly packed, a chaotic confluence of uncounted relics in overwhelming numbers.

There was unconscious awe in Kirk's voice as he studied the slowly shifting panorama. "It's a graveyard. A graveyard of ships from every part of the galaxy - maybe from Outside, too. Ships I've never seen before. Look at that one."

He was indicating a monstrous jumble of spikes and pylons bound together by a webbing of translucent arches. Not in his considerable experience nor in the recognition tapes Starfleet issued regularly had he seen anything remotely like it.

Nor, he ventured to guess, had he ever encountered anything like its unknown builders - wherever they were.

"Where are we, sir?" a voice asked hesitantly. Uhura's.

"I have no idea, Lieutenant," he said huskily. "I don't *think* we've traveled very far in space." He nodded towards the screen. "Some of those farther constellations looked unchanged. It's the nearer ones that look distorted. That means we may have traveled a respectable distance ... in time."

He broke off to stare at another vessel passing close by to starboard. It showed a more familiar outline - an interstellar cargo transport of a type and design discarded as obsolete some three hundred years ago.

"If we check," he went on, "I'll bet we'll find that many of these ships are ones designated by history as having been lost in the Delta Triangle."

"Where..." Uhura started to say, but Kirk had other concerns in mind.

"Mr. Arex, can you give us any idea of our present spatial position?" Arex worked at his console for several minutes. Eventually the bony skull swiveled round on its thin neck and he stared back at Kirk out of deep, soulful eyes.

"I'm afraid not, Captain. Our sensors are operating properly once more, but the star-field is not cooperating. I cannot place our position with any certainty, given the apparent position of the nearer stars. Nor can I pick up anything like a navigation beacon."

Kirk was nodding. "I suspected as much."

"An alternate universe, Captain?" Uhura wondered.

"Perhaps something of the sort, Lieutenant. If we were in the same universe but behind some form of energy screen then we ought to be able to plot our position. But as Mr. Arex says, everything is changed around here. Same universe, different continuum - it's all a matter of semantics."

Alternate universe, different continuum ... amazing how easily the words came when you were presented with an astrophysical *fait accompli.*

"Observations and comments, Mr. Spock."

"I can find no fault with your evaluation of the situation, Captain. I would add a thought, however.

"It must be remembered that many vessels which enter the Delta Triangle traverse it with no incident whatsoever. It would seem therefore that the contact between the two continua is erratic, the point of tangency shifting. In this case the *gate* remained open long enough for us to follow the *Klothos* in." He momentarily turned his attention back to a readout.

"Possibly it closed before our pursuers could follow us on through."

"I'm not sure they tried," Kirk ventured.

Scotty added a heartfelt, "Aye."

"Speaking of the *Klothos*, Captain, I've been scanning for her ever since we threw off the lingering effects of the entry." Sulu continued to probe the space around them with full scanners. "But there are so many ships here, it's near impossible to locate a specific one."

"Stay with it, Mr. Sulu."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk studied the viewscreen. Somewhere in that sargasso the *Klothos* drifted, perhaps disabled, perhaps as intact as the *Enterprise* seemed to be. The *Klothos*, which had sprung a totally unprovoked, premeditated surprise attack on them, he found himself looking forward to meeting again...

II

At slow speed the *Enterprise* moved deeper into the swarm of dead ships - and dead they surely were. Not a sign of life or hint of motion from any of them.

Every member of the bridge complement experienced related reactions to the sight of so many abandoned vessels, the thought of so many vanished crews. But for Chief Engineer Scott the experience bordered on the religious.

Naturally the man to whom starships themselves were reason for existence was most profoundly moved of them all.

"Sir," he told Kirk, his voice hushed, "there are ships here I've only seen crude drawings of. Pictures in museums. Ships I've only seen bare outlines of on the Federation's unconfirmed-sightings charts. Ships hinted at by rumors."

Spock added additional information, his library working overtime. "Sensor scans have provided a rough approximation of the age of the metal in some of the hulls, sir - those hulls which are metallic in composition. I have already catalogued several whose base is plastic. There is also one of a unique ceramic-metal alloy and even one of wood."

"Wood! Come on now, Mr. Spock!" Scott admonished. But Spock remained confident in the findings of his sensors.

"That is what the detectors reported, that is what the spectrograph confirmed, Mr. Scott. A wooden starship. The hull was composed of a celluloid material of a density not believed possible in an organic substance.

"As to the age, Captain," he continued, turning his attention back to Kirk, "while none of the vessels here have deteriorated, of course, there was sufficient degeneration of some material to indicate that many have been here for centuries. That may be a conservative estimate."

Scott's voice rose in a yelp of sudden recognition. He pointed at the screen. "My Great Aunt McTavish's haggis, Captain, isn't that the old *Bonaventure*?"

Kirk looked at that hulk. He had no question which of the myriad ships on the screen Scott was gesturing at.

Among the alien helical, parallelopiped, and conic ships floated a metal shape much like that of the *Enterprise*, only smaller. Its hull was not as smooth, festooned with awkward-looking projections and tubes, its design not as sleek - but nevertheless, a powerful vessel in its time.

Scott's voice was reverent They were looking upon a piece of the interstellar cross. "The *Bonaventure*, the first ship to have warp-drive installed. The first of us all."

"She vanished without a trace on her third voyage." Spock spoke from over by his hooded viewer. "The crew's descendants could still be living, Captain."

"Their descendants?" Kirk threw his science Officer a look of puzzlement. "But I thought..."

"The vessels in our immediate vicinity are indeed dead, Captain. But there is a chance some of their crews could have transferred to other ships. Specifically, to the cluster directly ahead of us, from which I am picking up faint energy and, I believe, life readings. They are increasing in intensity as we move nearer."

While Spock and Scott and Kirk studied the *Bonaventure* and this new possibility, the *Enterprise* was being observed on another screen.

With its life-systems screened out, and nestled carefully into the melange of empty hulks, the *Klothos* waited like a trap-door spider at the edge of its hole - all systems poised, only its eyes showing.

Senior Officer Kaas looked back from his station at the main sensor console. "It is the *Enterprise*, positively, Exalted One. Scanners indicate her shields are fully down."

"Excellent!" Commander Kor viewed the hated silhouette on his bridge viewscreen with satisfaction. He still did not understand what had happened to him and his ship, and for awhile it had seemed as though nothing good could come of it.

But now... "All hands to battle stations, quietly. Prepare to open fire on the *Enterprise* the moment she comes within range. Full disruptors - let's get her the first time, this time.

"First Engineer, I want minimum motive power to the engines. Navigator, intercept course. And rotate the ship slightly. It is imperative that we resemble one of these derelicts as much as possible."

***

Spock turned away from his loaded viewer for a quick glance up at the screen. His gaze started to turn back ... and lingered. One eyebrow rose a millimeter. Then he returned his attention to the viewer.

"Strange," he muttered.

"What, Mr. Spock?" asked Kirk idly.

"I had thought that the only sign of life here was in the cluster of ships lying directly ahead of us, but there appears to be..."

Before he could finish, Sulu was leaning forward in his seat, staring at the screen. His eyes suddenly bugged as he recognized one shape in the crowded scene, and his brows went even higher than Spock's.

"Captain ... the *Klothos* ... twenty degrees port!"

"Sound red alert," Kirk ordered sharply. "All deflectors on full - phasers lock on target."

"Aye, sir," Sulu responded, his hands moving faster than his reply. "Screens up ... phasers locked on."

On board the *Klothos*, sirens and horns suddenly howled in warning. Commander Kor shouted an obscene word, made a violent gesture.

Every disruptor that could be brought to bear immediately cut loose with a tremendous discharge of destructive energy. The *Klothos* shook with the release.

The wave-particle tide got halfway to the *Enterprise* - and the enormous charge shimmered and dissolved into nothingness. First Officer Kaas stared at his gauges with an expression he might have used if they had suddenly confronted a Kalusian sand serpent a hundred *kuvits* long.

"Sir, I don't ... our entire weapons system ... it's frozen."

Kor started to rise from the command seat, an appropriate comment on his lips - then there was a sudden crackling in the air. A brief whiff of ozone, the commander was outlined in a sharp flare and then he was gone. Utterly dumbfounded, the rest of the crew stared at the chair where their commander had sat seconds before.

On board the *Enterprise*, Kirk had a brief comment of his own, directed in this case to the helm. "Fire, Mr. Sulu."

"Firing phasers." It was the *Enterprise*'s turn to tremble with the release of annihilating energies.

Seconds passed before Kirk prodded Sulu. "This is no time for daydreaming - report, Mister."

"There's nothing to report, sir," the dazed Sulu finally managed to blurt. For a moment he thought the sensors might have gone berserk again, but no, they were operational. But the readings made no sense.

"No indication of damage, or even that the deflector shields of the *Klothos* registered contact. All instrumentation appears functional and..."

A sharp report, like the discharge of an ancient projectile weapon, sounded on the bridge. Sulu whirled in time to see

Kirk outlined by a radiant nimbus. It closed over him, and was gone.

So was Captain Kirk.

For once, Spock had nothing to say.

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The chamber conveyed a vastness of spirit rather than mere space. To a Terran it would have seemed more like a gothic cathedral rendered in pastel tones than anything else. A curved wall backed one end of the chamber, fronted by a raised dais.

Twelve beings sat behind a sloping table running the length of the dais. Male and female, human, humanoid, and other - no two members were of the same race.

A Klingon sat next to a Tallerine, who seemed tiny compared to the huge Berikazin on his right. Next to the representative of that warlike race sat a beautiful woman from the Orion system. An Edoan was near her, from the same world that had given Lieutenant Arex birth. A Vulcan rested at ease beside him. One could also see a Gorin and a human in the assembly.

There were also three aliens representing races no one in the Federation would have recognized, for they were as foreign to Federation knowledge as was the Tetroid ship the staff of the *Enterprise* had observed here. Yet they waited in harmony with their nine spiritual brothers and sisters.

There was an air of purposefulness about this place which transcended mere species. No seat was more prominent than another, no being of the twelve higher than his neighbor. At the moment an air of expectancy hovered over them, though none could say what they awaited.

A peculiar electrical discharge appeared in the room immediately before the dais. The flickering vanished and a large simian shape stood there.

Kor's reaction was typical of a Klingon warrior suddenly thrust into an inexplicable situation. He reached for his sidearm.

The clutching hand never touched the handle of the pistol. A secondary discharge formed in the region of the gun and he stumbled backwards. The electrical shock he had taken was not strong enough to hurt him badly. The import, however, was sufficient to discourage him from trying it again.

Near the center of this alien collage, a tall Romulan stood. His eyes were oddly sunken for a Romulan and his voice soft yet firm.

"My name is Xerius." He nodded in a way that was unmistakably directed at the weapon, and his voice turned cold. "That will not be needed here, Commander Kor."

Before Kor could offer the objections that occurred without thought, a golden cloud of charged particles formed at his side. He stepped hastily out of range of the tingling field. A moment, and Captain Kirk had materialized beside him.

Kirk spared Kor a barely contemptuous glance. Other things claimed his attention.

"My name is Xerius," the aged Romulan repeated. "Welcome to Elysia, Captain Kirk." Turning, he gestured at the exquisite Orionite woman who sat next to him.

"This is Devna, our interpreter of the laws. She will speak to you both, now."

As the woman stood, she cleared her throat - the first sign Kirk had that while remarkable, this place was not Olympus and its inhabitants not gods.

She bowed formally, her gaze shifting from one starship commandant to the other. "Gentlemen," she informed them in clear, bell-like tones, "you stand now before the ruling council of Elysia. Our nation, confederation ... call it what you will. Our world without a world.

"Representatives of one hundred and twenty-three races participate in our government Our existence dates back over a thousand Terran years. During this time these diverse peoples, many of whom were bitter enemies on the Outside, have learned to live together in peace. Learned to do so because they must.

"Any act of violence is strictly forbidden here and will be dealt with swiftly and with utmost severity." This directed primarily at the scowling Kor, though she didn't neglect Kirk.

The ritual speech ended abruptly. She smiled. "You are now each permitted a question. Captain Kirk?"

Kirk considered a moment before asking, "Are we in an alternate universe, truly?"

"It is not certain, but we believe otherwise," Devna told him. "This tiny universe has no stars or planets, though we can see many such. Exploration here has been most extensive. There is a barrier that cannot be pierced to the outer galaxy." Her smile grew wider, her attitude sympathetic.

"Those who were first here have had much time to explore. The finite limits of our environment is one reason why all must cooperate. This place is best described as a pocket in the fabric of normal space-time."

"A restrictive Elysium," Kirk murmured, but to himself.

"Never mind all that," Kor broke in roughly. "How did you freeze my weaponry?"

Overlooking his tone, Devna endeavored to explain. "We have among us many individuals gifted with psionic powers unknown to most races. On the Outside such people were often required to use their powers to exploit, terrorize, and kill. Here those powers are employed only to preserve the peace.

"All our energies are directed to the maintainance of that peace. You, a moment ago, were attempting to break that peace, Commander Kor. We will not allow that."

There was a significant pause while she stared at both men in turn, then a look at Xerius.

"Pronounce the law," the Romulan intoned solemnly.

Once more the Orionite bowed, this time to the Romulan, then turned back to the two commanders. "Under our law, as ship captains you are each responsible for the behavior of your crews at all times. Should a crew member engage in any form of violence against another intelligent being here, you will suffer the maximum penalty. Total immobilization of your ship and selves for a century. There is no lesser penalty for such an abomination."

Something had finally taken a little of the cockiness out of Kor, Kirk noticed. His startled reply carried little of its natural bile.

"A century!" he exclaimed "We will all be dead by the end of the penalty period."

"No, Commander Kor, you would not." Kirk looked closely at the Romulan. "This small universe of ours is a most curious trap, you see. Time passes here other than it does Outside. It moves with a most extraordinary patience. A century means nothing to us." He gestured at his colleagues.

"Our council appears fairly young, yet all of us are centuries old."

And *that* took some of the self-assurance out of Kirk, "No war, and near immortality," he murmured softly. "Your life here must be almost perfect."

Xerius smiled wistfully. "The same laws that enable us to exist here over the decades in peace compel me to tell you the truth, Captain Kirk. At one time or another, not one among us has not experienced a desire to leave this place, to return to the normal universe. Such desires can be tamed.

"We have made the best possible existence here, Captain, our lasting peace, because we have found there is no choice. There is no escape from Elysia - as you will find."

Each word of the Romulan's last sentence fell like a steel weight on Kirk. It had a similar effect on Kor. Incredible as it seemed, the confidence in Xerius' pronouncement belied any attempt to deceive them.

And with a thousand years in which to explore and attempt, it was possible that he was right - though every molecule of Kirk's mind rejected such a possibility.

"No escape ... no escape ... no escape..." The words rattled around in his head maddeningly. There had to be a way. He'd seen little enough of this paradise, but one thing he did not doubt was Xerius' contention that everyone had tried to leave it at least once.

It was like the children's fable of the man who became a billionaire, had himself transformed into the handsomest man in the galaxy - and then found himself trapped on an empty world. Money is valueless with naught to spend it on.

The same was true of life. Yet ... it might be merely years of practice, of concealing truth, but as he read those expressions he could on the faces of the twelve, there were none that looked mad or unbalanced. These people had come to believe in their isolated immortality. It wasn't surprising, really.

Sanity dictated it.

Well, they could swim in it if they liked. He wanted no part of it. Right now all he desired was to be back on the bridge of the *Enterprise* where...

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...Spock, Scott, and Sulu suddenly entered from the elevator, Kirk between them, still talking.

Otherwise the bridge was empty. The viewscreen remained on, still showing a panorama of the metal constellation swirling about them.

"...and that's the whole of it, gentlemen," he finished, sitting down in the command chair. Spock and Scott arranged

themselves nearby while Sulu took up his position at the helm. Kirk gestured at the screen.

"They may not be able to get out of here; they may be resigned and even happy with their *perfect* society - but we are getting out."

"Then we'd better do it pretty quickly, Captain," Scott said warningly. Kirk eyed him uncertainly.

"I'm afraid speed may not be possible," Spock ventured. "As the captain has told us, these people have been here for centuries, and their escape plans have failed. We'll need time to find an answer." Typical Spock, Kirk thought admiringly, understatement and complete confidence in the same breath.

His confidence did not rub off on the chief engineer. "Time is just what we haven't got."

"What's wrong, Scotty," Kirk said calmingly. "I thought time was the one thing we had an unlimited supply of here."

"Only in the abstract sense, Captain," Scott replied crisply. "Not in the practical. No wonder no one's been able to work out an escape plan from this continuum.

"It's the dilithium crystals. They're deteriorating again, breaking up - and rapidly."

"But how...?" Kirk began, and then looked exasperated. "I sometimes wish, Mr. Spock, that Professor Jenkins and his associates had found a more stable substance on which to base their successful warp-drive."

"It is this very instability that gives dilithium crystals the triggering power necessary to drive starship engines, Captain," reminded Spock.

"I don't know how it's happenin', sir," Scott continued. "It's not like the last time ... the breakdown is fast, but not as bad. And it's a basic atomic breakdown, it's not in the molecular links this time.

"I've no doubt it's somehow connected with the same energies that slow time here. At any rate, I calculate that we've another four days our time before the power goes completely."

"It's a gradual breakdown, then?"

"Aye, Captain. That's the odd part of it. The crystals lose power uniformly."

Kirk nodded. "Otherwise we would lose every function on the ship. Be unable to maintain life-support. I wonder what the other ships here use as substitute for dilithium. Their drives don't appear radically different from ours."

"There are other races here whose engineering abilities we know nothing of, Captain. Think of the unique transporter, for example, which took both you and Commander Kor at a moment's notice. Clearly they possess an alternate energy system sufficient to keep them alive, but not sufficient to drive a ship at a decent rate of speed."

"Four days to get out of here, then." He threw his science officer a questioning glance. "Got any miracles in your physical-science tapes, Mr. Spock?"

"The basis for producing miracles does not exist in the system, Captain."

"I'll settle for a natural solution, then. You'll start work on the theory immediately, Spock. When you have something worked out, talk it through with Scotty. If his objections get too strenuous, go back and start again.

"Requisition whatever you need. Work around the clock until you arrive at a formula for getting us out of here." He looked away, back up at the screen. "If you can't find one in ninety-six hours, you'll have plenty of time to catch up on lost sleep..."

***

On board the *Klothos*, in the pseudo-barbaric chamber that was the commander's quarters, Kor looked up suddenly from the sheaf of forms he was studying. His attention was focused on the erect figure of First Officer Kaas, who stood stiffly at attention.

"You call yourself a science officer!" Kor sneared, suddenly throwing the forms and printouts in Kaas' face. The first officer flinched only slightly.

"These computations are useless. You couldn't compute your way out of the defecatory." Standing, he jabbed a finger at the other officer's nose. "Get out of my sight and don't come back until you have a plan that will work. Not one that delineates at length the reasons for your ineptitude."

Kaas saluted smartly, his upper lip trembling only a little. "Yes, Exalted One." Then he knelt, quietly gathered up the scattered forms, and left the cabin.

Kor watched him go. He paced nervously for long minutes before throwing himself on the circular sleeping platform. Rolling over, he stared up at the multi-depth picture set into the ceiling. He felt caged - by this room, this ship, this accursed pocket in time and space.

His sole consolation was that Kirk must be as frustrated as he was.

***

Only three of the twelve who had welcomed the newcomers now waited in the council chamber. Devna and Xerius were seated at the far end of the dais.

Between them sat a female from a world in the little known Omega Cyna system - a world of light gravity, as shown by her long slender limbs and slimness across the body. There was a quality of ethereal suppleness about that form. Otherwise it was fully humanoid.

Her head was bent, her eyes shut tight in concentration. The lights in the chamber were dimmed.

"What do you see beyond your eyes, Megan?" Devna whispered softly, putting her lips close to one nearly transparent ear of the Cygnian.

Long, long pause. The female's head rose slowly. The lids slid back to reveal a pair of silver mirrors, blank, pupilless.

"The two newcomers..." The voice was delicate, fairylike - wind blowing through high grass. "In each ship, beings strive to solve a riddle."

"Name the riddle," demanded Xerius.

"The riddle of the time trap. Escape, escape." The wind blew harder. "They are desperate for a way out. A way back to their own space-time, to their own universe." Boneless hands fluttering in agitation, in helpless empathy. "Escape, escape...!"

Devna reached out hurriedly and took the woman's nearest hand, rubbed her own palm gently along its back. "Gently ... gently, good Megan. Easily ... return to us now. See us now."

The Cygnian named Megan let out a sibilant sigh, an almost imperceptible whisper of air as thin lungs contracted, The mirrors of her eyes appeared to dissolve, to break up like blots of silver ink. The eyes turned to a light gold color, and from a tiny pinprick in the center, black pupils appeared, expanded to full size. Vertical, they were, slitted like a cat's.

The Cygnian smiled sadly at her companions. "The new ones wish only to get away, to run. It's always the same for the new ones. I'm sad for them."

"You're sad for everyone, Megan. That's part of you and your people. The sympathy you feel for others, intensified by your mind, enables you to see with sympathy all that others do."

"They may wish to escape all they like, fight as hard as they want," commented Xerius. "It is quite impossible. There is no danger from that."

"Still," Devna countered, "it is natural that they do so. They cannot help themselves, Xerius. They must try. They would not be normal if they did not. All must try before they come to accept. Best to leave them so and not try to compel."

"That is truth," Xerius admitted. "All will be well in four days' time when they have no hope. I wish it were now. Even to keep the watch, to see that in their fear they do no harm to themselves or others, feels unnatural to me. It implies the threat of direct physical restraint.

"When I was forced to prevent Commander Kor from drawing his weapon in the council chamber, the action made me almost physically ill. Eventually they will feel the same - even the one named Kor."

"You controlled yourself well, Xerius," agreed Devna. "I think the effort it cost you was worth it. The lesson was taken to heart by Captain Kirk, at least I felt as sick as you. All of us on the council did.

"It is something we must go through. A close watch is especially vital in this case because it seems that these two are natural antagonists."

"So it would appear," Xerius admitted. "It is difficult, not knowing what is happening in the socio-political universe about us."

"But we do have our compensations, Xerius," Devna reminded him quietly...

***

Spock was working at the library computer station, Kirk staring over his shoulder. Both men were examining a series of figures the astrogation computer had just coughed up.

More than a little time had passed since Scott's ultimatum. Kirk was growing by turns tired and depressed. Initial results had not been encouraging. It seemed impossible that Spock would not be feeling the same emotions; but, of course, even if he were it would never show.

The most one could say for him was that his usual precision of manner was showing some wear. Spock held his fatigue inside. Kirk glanced back up, at the viewscreen.

Nestled squarely in its center and surrounded by ancient derelicts lay the *Klothos*. Behind it was the tight cluster of ships that still held power and life. Elysia's inhabitants tended to group tightly together for company and companionship, shifting from one ship to another as internal arrangements permitted.

In this way they achieved a certain amount of variety in companionship over the years. Over the centuries, Kirk thought. The image held before them was far from cheering. He turned from the thought and the view of the *Klothos*.

"This is the very best you and your theoreticians could come up with, Mr. Spock?"

"Yes, Captain. I was personally astonished we could produce a plan so efficacious in so short a time."

"I was hoping you could pull a whole rabbit out of that computer instead of part of one. You've done it before."

"I do not ever recall nor do I see any reason," Spock replied in confusion, "why you should suddenly expect me to produce a Terran mammal of the leporid family from the computer banks at this, or any other time."

Kirk waved it off. "Slip of the tongue, Spock. What I meant was that when there seemed to be no possible answer, no conceivable solution to a problem, you and that machine operating in tandem have produced one time after time."

"Not this time, it appears, Captain," Spock confessed, never one to offer an encouraging word in place of the truth.

"Have you covered every possibility?" Kirk pressed desperately. "Every factor - I don't care how extreme the mathematics."

"*Every* possibility, Captain, several times. The facts are, simply, that with our maximum drive we do not have the capability to pierce the continuum barrier. I do not wish to surrender all hope, but the facts do not offer reason for much encouragement. This was the best we could do."

Kirk looked around, suddenly stood up and stared uncertainly at the screen.

"Well, he isn't giving up, at least."

Spock turned away from his console too, as did everyone else on the bridge, to watch the screen.

The *Klothos* had begun to move. It was leaving its parking position and moving off at high speed. Automatic trackers, preset on the *Klothos* to free Sulu and Arex for research, adjusted themselves to follow the Klingon cruiser. Kirk spoke without turning.

"If they can do it, why can't we?"

"I do not believe they can, Captain," Spock said with assurance. Kirk stared at him. "I consider it the unlikeliest of possibilities. Clearly Commander Kor believes otherwise.

"Their S-Two Graph unit, which is roughly the equivalent to our warp-drive, began giving off depleted energy readings at the same time as engineer Scott reported the start of dissolution among our own dilithium supplies. Their situation is no different from ours, their abilities to react to it no better.

"Kor has apparently decided to try it anyway, regardless of the attempts of his navigator and engineers to dissuade him. I am certain they have tried. The attempt may cost them all their dilithium, even to the loss of power to their life-support systems."

"So he's going to try, contrary to the advice from his own experts, without a chance of getting through?" Kirk looked skeptical. "I don't see even a megalomaniac like Kor trying that."

"You are momentarily forgetting the Klingon mentality, Captain," Spock reminded patiently. "It concludes that the guiding law of life is that all laws are made to be violated. To them their treaties with the natural universe are as tenuous as those they make with other peoples. That is why their advancement in the physical sciences was held back for so long.

"I need not add mention of their pride, which is everything to a Klingon - especially to a commanding officer like Kor. He would do personal battle with a sun if his pride was at stake."

"You're right, as usual, Spock," Kirk turned back to stare at the screen. The *Klothos* was now passing beyond the last row of desiccated starships and out into the blackness beyond.

Kirk should have thought of that himself. Kor could not live with his trampled ego without at least making the escape attempt...

III

A subtle trembling had begun to run through the bridge of the accelerating *Klothos*. Kor and his officers ignored it, as they ignored the alarm lights which had begun to flash around them.

The forward scanners showed a strange mix of light and faint color. Sensors indicated a concatenation of immensely powerful forces centered ahead.

The first officer of the *Klothos* struggled to keep his voice normal as he reported to his commander. "All power beyond minimal life-support has been diverted to the engines, sir. We're continuing to pick up speed."

Kor looked over at him, showing equal control - control he didn't feel.

"Continue on course for the coordinates indicated."

"Yes, Exalted One." Kaas' attitude was that of a Klingon warrior about to plunge into battle against overwhelming odds. He was prepared to die, he only wished for a less indifferent opponent.

"Approaching maximum drive, sir," he reported, after a glance at the controls.

The center of the glowing vortex appeared to take on a slight spinning effect, its flanks bursting with erratic flares of violet light. The *Klothos* impinged on the outer edge of the luminescent matrix.

A high-pitched whine began to build on the bridge, accompanied by a steady increase in the trembling beneath Kaas' feet. It built to the point where Kor had to hold tightly to the arms of his command chair to avoid being thrown to the floor.

Several other members of the bridge staff were not so lucky; they were thrown off balance and had to fight to regain their seats. The whine grew to deafening proportions.

The ship's lights went out and were replaced by a faint purplish light something like the color of the Terran sky seen from the bottom of a spaceport lift shaft. The whine became a scream, a howl. One officer clapped both hands to his ears, forgetting his controls. Another severe jolt rocked the bridge. Then they were all tumbling, falling, as the *Klothos* spun suddenly on its axis and the artificial gravity failed to compensate in time.

Instantly, their speed started to diminish. Though no one was able to report this immediately - least of all Kaas, who had been thrown against a far bulkhead and knocked unconscious.

Spinning, tumbling, rolling crazily, the *Klothos* had been thrown back along the path it had come. Its speed reversed, it was slowing perceptibly by the time it neared its original parking position.

Attitude control was far from being reestablished, however. A slight deviation in its return path was enough to send it crashing into and through half a dozen of the unoccupied, drifting starships. Mangled and dented, it finally came to a complete stop as some desperate engineer shut down its engines completely.

Broken compartments released a small cloud of frost ... frozen atmosphere bleeding from a broad crack near the rear of the tilted hull.

On the bridge the shrill whine had been replaced by a wail of another sort - a mixture of the overworked alarm system and the cries of injured personnel. Kirk and Spock were not privy to such cries as they studied the damage to the once powerful battle cruiser, now centered in the main viewscreen.

For a moment, Kirk's pent-up anger at Kor's earlier actions was replaced by a grudging admiration. "You were right, Spock, but I almost wish they had made it."

"I am glad they did not," the first officer replied easily. Kirk gasped in surprise.

"Spock, *you* hold a grudge?"

"Not at all, Captain. I would never experience such an unreasonable, long-term emotion. It is rather that their unsuccessful attempt has given me an idea as to how we may be able to break through the barrier."

Kirk waited a moment, then, "Well ... what is it, Spock?"

"I would suggest that everyone concerned with the eventual attempt hear this together. There will be emotional as well as physical requirements."

"I don't understand."

"Neither may certain members of the crew, Captain. Especially any who have been involved in serious conflicts with the Klingons before. I suggest, therefore, that we and the principal officers concerned adjourn to the central briefing room."

"I'm not sure what you're leading up to, Spock, but if you think this is the way to handle it..."

"It is for the best, Captain."

Unlike previous gatherings in the spacious conference room, no one ventured any jokes in an attempt to lighten the atmosphere. McCoy in particular wondered at the absence of Uhura. The reasons for excluding her from the conference would become clear as Spock explained his intentions.

Uhura had more reason than any of them to dislike the Klingons.

Beside Kirk and Spock, the conference included Scott, Dr. McCoy, and Sulu. Lieutenant Arex was on duty on the bridge along with Uhura, primarily to keep an eye on the *Klothos*, though it appeared certain that Commander Kor would be unable to mount any surprises for quite a while.

Aware the others were watching him expectantly, Kirk began immediately. "Mr. Spock has come up with a formula which has a chanpe to extricate us from this paradise. Here is one instance where figures speak louder than words."

So saying, he hit a switch just under the edge of the table top. A standard three-sided viewer popped up in its center. Another adjustment, and a complex set of computations began to appear on the three screens.

Kirk and Spock already knew what the computations meant. McCoy could hardly follow them at all. So it was a toss-up between Scott and Sulu as to which man would see their significance first. The first expression to become quizzical, then lopsided, then finally appalled was Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Scotts.

"But this involves combining, in close-order maneuvering, with the *Klothos*, Captain. Closer-order maneuvering ... hell, it means combining ships!"

"That's right, Mr. Scott," agreed Kirk quietly. The chief engineer did not try to conceal his disgust at such a prospect.

"You mean you want us to work hand in hand with those vipers? Engine dregs, murderers..."

"It's our only choice for getting out of here, Scotty." The chief said nothing more, but continued to mumble under his breath. Were Uhura present, further discussion would have been impossible. Someone would have to break the news to her later.

Meanwhile, Sulu had been working furiously with his pocket computer, occasionally glancing up at the nearest of the three-sided screens to cross-check his own work with the original equations.

"As a problem in navigation it has more loose ends than a millipede, Captain. Trying to guide two such disparate vessels through such an intricate maneuver..." His voice trailed off and he shook his head wonderingly.

"How difficult, Mr. Sulu?" Kirk pressed. The helmsman tried to hedge his reply.

"I can't say for sure, Captain." He squirmed mentally. "Just ... difficult."

"Impossible?"

"No ... no, not impossible."

"Do you really believe that?" That forced a half-grin from the helmsman.

"I'm not sure whether I do or not, Captain. But I am sure that if Mr. Spock is confident enough to propose it, then he thinks it isn't impossible - though I'm not going to press him too hard for the exact odds. I think I'd rather not know.

"If he considers such a plan workable, then it's up to Arex and myself to find a way to make it work."

"That's that, then." Kirk turned his attention back to his chief engineer. "Mr. Scott, your comments?" Scott appeared to wrestle with himself a few moments longer. He too had little reason to love the Klingons. But eventually, he capitulated.

"Considerin' that we've only two days left before our supply of dilithium has deteriorated to the point where we can no longer drive the ship, I'd say we've no choice but to go with Mr. Spock's plan, Captain. Though I don't like it. Not one bit."

"I know how you feel, Scotty," Kirk sympathized. "I'd prefer just about any alternative. We haven't any. If it makes you feel any better, consider that Kor and his people will like it even less." He smiled sardonically.

"Our dislike of them is founded on reality, which enables us to consider such a plan rationally. Their pathological hatred of non-Klingons would prevent them from thinking of one - but it won't stop them from going along with it."

"That's just my point, Captain," Scott wondered. "Can we trust them?"

Kirk spread his hands. "That we don't know." Sulu finished his own figuring, stated his position.

"I agree with one thing, though, Captain, we have to try it."

"As for the Klingons being trusted..." Kirk turned to McCoy. Having nothing to contribute to an argument on astrophysics, the doctor had sat quietly through the entire discussion. "What do you think, Bones?"

"Emotionally," McCoy began, "I tend to concur with Mr. Scott. The idea of combining ship functions with that crew of backstabbers automatically sends my hand for a phaser." He looked resigned.

"But to get out of here, I think they'll restrain their inherent animosity toward us. Anything to escape this elephants' graveyard."

"Exactly," agreed Spock.

McCoy shot him a look of surprise.

"Now there's a reference I would not have thought you'd know, Mr. Spock."

"Reading the great fantasies of Terran fiction was one of my mother's favorite pastimes, Doctor," Spock informed him. "As a child I read through all of them avidly."

"Then we're all agreed on this," put in a smiling Kirk. "I'll get in touch with Kor immediately..."

***

"Escape, escape, *escape*..." Megan fairly vibrated with the violence of the emotions and thoughts she was reading. Devna had to reach out quickly again to soothe the Cygnian.

"Softly now, Megan," she whispered reassuringly, "softly."

But Megan had no control over modulating such emotions.

"It burns them ... it consumed them ... it is a ... *fire*." Her voice shook dangerously.

"Return to me now, Megan," Devna husked quickly. "Gently, gentle, return ... see me ... *now*." The bright mirrors shattered like a pool of quicksilver. Their normal light gold color returned, the cat-pupils emerging.

"It is a violence in them. They have no control over it."

"Not yet, perhaps," countered Devna, "but they will come to accept. All do, eventually. There is no other choice."

"What has been learned?" queried a new voice. Both women turned to see Xerius materialize in the chamber.

"These new ones," Devna went on, "they learn nothing from their first attempt at escape. Now there is a new plan ... to combine their two ships and try again. Can you not stop them, Xerius?" The speaker of the council looked troubled.

"It is not against our laws to try to escape."

"But they may kill themselves in these mad attempts. Already one of their ships has been damaged and people injured."

"That is how it must be, then, till they are convinced," Xerius replied stolidly. He looked thoughtful, reminiscing.

"Remember, Devna, how I tried and tried to flee? Tried till my ship and my people and even I were beaten. Only then did I begin to accept. So long as they do not break our laws we must not impede them. Were we to do so *we* would be breaking the laws. Not only that, but doing so would lead them to think they were our prisoners, and then they might never come to join us in peace.

"No, they must learn the futility of escape for themselves."

"Even if they kill each other in the process?" Devna wondered bitterly. "Our laws forbid violence. Why then do we allow them to do violence to themselves?"

"It is only violence against others that is..." Xerius looked up at Megan. "You have been looking into them, Megan." The Cygnian nodded. "Tell me, then. If a majority are being forced to try these escape attempts..."

But the Cygnian shook her head. "One word branded indelibly in all, their minds, that word is *escape*."

Xerius looked slightly downcast. "It is as I remember it, from long ago." He smiled sadly at Devna. "You see, Devna? They must try. They must burn this desire out of themselves. This thing we cannot do for them."

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The main briefing room on the *Klothos* was far more elaborately decorated than its counterpart on the *Enterprise*. The central table was inlaid with rough-cut gem-stones. Spotted and striped, diamond patterned and tight-curled furs padded the seats. Archaic heraldic banners were on the walls, sealed in transparent plastic. Only four officers were present. Kor and Kaas representing the *Klothos*, Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock from the *Enterprise*. The discussion had been going on for over an hour now - Kor's screeches alternating with Kirk's taut replies, Kaas' aloofness bouncing off Spock's invulnerable calmness.

At last all suggestions had been made, all inferior arguments rebutted.

"Then it's settled," Kirk sighed finally. "Our science and engineering teams will get to work immediately at integrating both warp-drives and navigation systems so that we can maneuver as a single ship. Exchange of personnel and beginning of computer interlock will commence as soon as we return to our ship."

Fourteen natural objections leaped to the fore In Kor's mind. He forced every one of them down. These were extraordinary circumstances. So all he muttered was a curt, "Agreed."

They rose. Or at least, three of them did. Spock remained seated, his face blank, almost dreamy.

"Mr. Spock," Kirk said. The first officer suddenly became alert. Rising, he started for the door.

Spock pushed his way between Kor and Kaas and threw an arm around the shoulders of both men. "I cannot tell you," he confessed, his voice bordering on true emotion, "how impressed I am by your splendid spirit of cooperation." There was total amazement in the room. It was impossible to say whether the two Klingon officers or Kirk stared at Spock with more astonishment.

"I realize we have had our differences in the past," Spock continued unctuously, "but now we can be brothers in the face of adversity,"

Kor's natural reaction to such intimate and uninvited personal contact would have been a fast stab to the throat with his nails. Had Kirk tried a similar move, that might have been what would have happened. But coming from Spock, the action so stunned the Klingon commander that all he could do was squirm uncomfortably in the Vulcan's grasp.

"Mr. Spock," Kor muttered, "if you will please..." Kirk, in a state bordering on paralysis, continued to stare. Spock released both mortal enemies then placed his hands on Kor's shoulders;

"Forgive me, Commander," he said gently. "I was overcome by the import of this moment. May I shake your hand?"

"I suppose so," the dazed commander replied. He extended his hand as if it were no longer a part of his arm. Spock took it, shook firm and long. Releasing the still befuddled Klingon, he turned to his own counterpart on the *Klothos*. That worthy was staring silently at him with an expression usually reserved for the more interesting specimens of previously unknown alien life.

"And yours, Science Officer Kaas." The first officer of the cruiser extended his own hand ... somewhat reluctantly - and Spock shook it, hard.

"Goodbye, for now," Spock said. Then, apparently overcome still further, he turned and started for the door, shoulders heaving, concealing his face.

Kirk followed, glanced back at Kor and Kaas, rather embarrassed. "Goodbye, Mr. Spock," mumbled Kor. "Captain Kirk."

The door slid shut behind them. Kaas stared at it for several seconds after the two Federation officers had left before breaking the silence.

"The stories of his being half human must be true."

"More than true," agreed Kor. "Or perhaps passage through the continuum gate affected his hybrid mind more than most." That shook the first officer from his lethargy. He turned to eye his commander with something less than mindless subordination.

"I wonder," he began pointedly, "if perhaps we all haven't been affected."

"Explain yourself," Kor ordered, but not as sharply as he should have.

"This willingness of yours all of a sudden to work closely with an old enemy like Kirk. With one who has thwarted so many thrusts of the Empire. It is not like you, Commander. What do you really have in mind?"

Kor relaxed, let out a Klingon chuckle - a sound as devoid of humor as a cobra's hiss. "You've been my first officer too long for me to conceal much from you, Kaas. Very well.

"What would you think if the *Enterprise* were suddenly to disintegrate after our dual ship had pierced the space-time window?"

"I would think my Commander had maneuvered brilliantly."

"I think the implications are clear?"

"Perfectly," Kaas responded, understanding what was required, now.

"And it can be arranged?" The first officer hesitated before replying, ran clawed fingers over the polished wood of the briefing table.

"It involves a high risk factor, given the lack of time to prepare and Kirk's naturally suspicious nature. Yet I think it can be arranged."

"Very good, Kaas. I'll leave it to you to attend to the details of the *Enterprise*'s destruction." The two Klingon officers exchanged vows.

***

Of all the hundreds of ships drifting in the blackness of the pocket universe, none were stranger than the two that hummed with activity near its center. Blue and purple from tiny phaser welders surrounded the doubled vessels with shifting motes of light, and it wore a corona of suited figures busily weaving about its multiple hull.

The *Enterprise* had been maneuvered to a point just above the *Klothos*. Now the two ships were being joined together with cables and plates, bars and impulse connectors.

Kirk leaned back in the command chair, studying the changing view on the main screen. Multiple external scanners provided a constantly changing picture of the work in progress. They were racing a clock with too few hours left.

They had to finish by tomorrow noon, ship time. That was the point at which the power supplies of both ships would be depleted to such an extreme that they could not reach the minimum speed necessary to satisfy Spock's figures. Time and navigational requirements were inflexible.

If they failed, they would be trapped here forever.

McCoy was nearby, chatting with Sulu. The doctor was trying for the eighth, or possibly the ninth time, to get an

explanation in layman's language of the complicated physics through which it was hoped they could break back into the normal universe.

"Beg your pardon, sir," came a voice from behind him. Kirk swiveled in his chair, was confronted by Second Engineer Gabler and another crewman he didn't recognize immediately. A drive tech ... Bell was the name.

Slouching between them - rather reluctantly, Kirk thought - was a Klingon engineer. With a thousand other things on his mind, Kirk forced himself to devote full attention to the men before him.

"What is it, Mr. Gabler?"

"Sir, Bell and I are the relief watch for the dilithium storage tanks." Gabler's way of telling Kirk that the suspicious Scott had placed guards at certain vital points in his section. "We arrived a few minutes late and found this one and a couple of his buddies poking around."

"Where are the buddies?" Kirk inquired, glancing behind the Klingon and seeing no one else.

"Being watched, sir. This one appeared to be in charge."

"This is absurd, Captain Kirk," the Klingon engineer broke in. "We were lost, that is all. What is more natural when one is performing hurried work on a strange ship?"

"Lost, my foot," protested Gabler angrily. "It's clearly posted as a restricted area. You didn't have any trouble reading any of the more complicated symbols. Keep Out is one I'll bet you recognized easy enough. You knew all along you weren't supposed to be in there."

"Gentlemen, I'm sure there's been a mistake." Everyone turned to stare at Spock as he moved toward them from his position at the library computer station. He put a comradely arm around the shoulders of the Klingon. The engineer couldn't have been more shocked if he'd been bitten by a malachite tree viper.

Once again Kirk found himself at a loss for words. "Now then, my good fellow," Spock inquired pleasantly, "where were you supposed to be working?"

"Ah ... your pardon, sir, but..." The Klingon found an answer quickly. "Engineering subdeck five."

"Close enough to the dilithium storage area. A natural enough error, I'm sure you'll agree, Captain."

"If you say so, Spock," Kirk responded uncertainly.

"There, you see?" Spock said to Gabler. "A perfectly natural mistake. Allow me to escort this young man back to his work area, Captain."

"Very well, Mr. Spock."

Spock, his arm around the Klingon engineer, turned and steered him toward the elevator, talking easily with the alien. The latter continued to eye the Vulcan uneasily. As soon as the doors closed behind them, Kirk looked firmly at Bell and Gabler.

"Return to your posts - and don't leave until you've been formally relieved."

"Aye, sir." Gabler saluted stiffly, making no attempt to hide his displeasure at the way things had proceeded. He and Bell turned and left the bridge.

When Kirk turned the chair back he found McCoy had been standing behind him. There was a note of real concern in the doctor's tone.

"Are you as worried about Spock as I am, Jim? Taking into account what you told me about his actions on board the *Klothos*, and now seeing it for myself, I'd say it would be the understatement of the millennium to say he's not acting quite normal."

Kirk rubbed a hand across his forehead. "He's been performing under a lot of pressure, Bones. All of us have.

Spock's been working around the clock for the past two days - almost three, now, and we're not finished yet. Arex and Sulu have checked his calculations, but this is still being done at his say-so. And the most crucial moments are still ahead of us, when he has to be at his sharpest."

"I know that, Jim. So listen to the say-so of someone who has not been under so much pressure recently, when I say that there's something wrong with him. I've never known Spock to act like a pal under any circumstances. Least of all toward the Klingons."

Kirk frowned, clearly worried. "That's true, of course, Bones, but..."

"If he's coming apart, Jim," McCoy continued relentlessly, "then we're in real trouble. He handled all the original computations for this escape try himself. If he's not, as you say, a hundred percent when we start to move, he could go under the pressure - and take the rest of us with him."

Kirk reflected on the situation. Bones was exactly right, of course. Maybe he had become so exhausted himself these past couple of days he had not paid enough attention to the condition of those around him - especially Spock's. Particularly since the science officer's work had not suffered.

Still, you never knew for sure what Spock might be concealing.

"All right, I'll talk to him, Bones. That's about all I can do. I can hardly recommend he see you for medication without something more positive."

"No, you can't, Jim. I don't even know if unnatural friendliness on the part of a Vulcan is a sign of illness. I only know it's not part of Spock's normal behavior."

Kirk rose from the command chair. "He's in the main briefing room. I'll take care of it now."

"Good. And Jim?"

Kirk paused. "Yes, Bones?"

"Whatever you find out, let me know. So I can be prepared. In case."

Kirk nodded once.

The briefing room, where Spock could work in absolute privacy, was crowded, but not with people. The table was littered with piles of computer tape, cards, tiny cassettes, diagrams and computations. Material spilled off the desk onto chairs, dripped onto the floor like white moss.

At the moment, Spock was totally absorbed in the study of a series of projected energy abstracts on the three-sided central screen. Kirk didn't remember when the first officer had last slept, but he rose promptly when Kirk entered the room.

Kirk smiled reassuringly. Spock took this as a sign that nothing of an emergency nature had developed, sat back down and concentrated once more on the tiny lists of figures. Kirk examined another side of the triple viewer for a few moments, then looked evenly at his first officer.

"Everything seems to be moving on schedule. But then, you're the only person who can really be sure. Everything devolves on you, doesn't it, Spock?"

"I would suppose so, Captain."

"Any final determination of our chances?"

Spock replied without looking up, though there was a note of puzzlement in his voice. "That is an odd question to ask at this stage, Captain."

"Nothing serious, Spock. It's just that Dr. McCoy and I were thinking - well, there has been something about your recent behavior of late - particularly toward the Klingons..." He trailed off uncomfortably.

Now Spock looked up, spoke thoughtfully. "Yes, I grant you it is not my usual pattern."

Back went his gaze to the viewer. He touched a control and a new set of abstracts appeared on the screen.

"Well," Kirk finally pressed, when it was evident Spock wasn't going to add anything, "is something wrong?"

"I believe there is, Captain. But not with me," he added quickly, noticing the sudden look of alarm on Kirk's face. "With the Klingons.

"I sensed something odd about their attitude when we were aboard the *Klothos*. Kor was far too agreeable to our proposals."

"You think so?" Kirk wondered. "He objected to every suggestion we made."

"And ended by agreeing with all of them. I believe his objections were mere verbal camouflage. And his first officer, Kaas, seemed to me more at ease than our mere presence would explain."

"It might be due to their desire to get out of hare as desperately as we," Kirk countered. "There could be a host of reasons for both Kor and Kaas acting the way they did."

"I would agree that their behavior might have other explanations, Captain, had I not touched them. But even though the physical contact was necessarily limited, and their minds were uncertain, I did detect a number of subtle indications in Kor - physical as well as mental - connected normally with victory and conquest in Klingon physiology.

"It is not a simple thing to convey with words, Captain. You have to experience it. I can only infer that Kor had an attack on the *Enterprise* in mind even as he agreed to cooperate with us."

"Attack? How can they attack us when our ships are maneuvering as one?"

"I don't know, Captain. But I would hypothesize some form of delayed action. Something that will affect us when we have

successfully broken the barrier and the *Klothos* has separated from us."

"Could you gain any hint from Kor's mind, Spock?" Kirk leaned over the table intently.

"No, Captain. At the time Commander Kor may not have decided on the method, only the course. I am not that telepathically gifted, you know.

"I also studied the mood and mind of the Klingon engineer who was discovered in the dilithium vault There was nothing specific in his thoughts - only a vague feeling of animosity, which is to be expected, and expectancy, which is not. I cannot escape the feeling that some kind of sabotage is being planned against the ship."

There was silence while Kirk weighed possible action. "Whatever they have in mind, they can't do anything until after we've finished our run at the barrier. They need us to get through. That gives us time to uncover anything they try to plant on board." He activated the desk com.

"Security, this is the captain speaking. I want all security teams on round-the-clock duty now. Watch every Klingon who is working on board the ship double-close. Interior or exterior. I don't want one of them to go to the bathroom without our knowing about it."

"We've been watching them all along, Captain," came the reply.

"I know that. I want the most intense surveillance you can mount, Mister. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," came the abashed response. Kirk switched off, looked satisfied. "If they try anything, we'll be ready for it."

"I hope so, Captain," Spock mused. He turned his full attention back to the screen. "I sincerely hope so."

***

The other members of the bridge complement on the *Klothos* ignored the conversation of the three officers grouped around Commander Kor's chair. As any good Klingon crew ought, they attended strictly to their assigned tasks, closing ears and eyes and minds to all that occurred around them that did not require their personal concern.

Kor and the female, Lieutenant Kali, cast expectant eyes on the first officer.

"All is in readiness, then," Kor announced. "You have the device Kaas?"

In reply, the first officer reached into a belt pouch, pulled out a small, deceptively innocent-looking device. It was about the size and shape of a throat lozenge and looked to be about as dangerous. It gave even Kor pause when he considered what was bound up inside that tiny package.

"My compliments to Engineer Kanff," he said ift open admiration. Kor always appreciated fine workmanship. "A wonder that they got it so small. Kanff and his staff are due a decoration for this."

"Yes, an extraordinary job, considering the requirements and the lack of time in which to fulfill them," Kaas agreed.

"How is to be triggered?"

Kaas turned the compact device over in his hand, displaying casual disregard for its capabilities.

"According to Engineering's calculations, we must achieve at least warp-eight to have a chance of penetrating the barrier. At the time our dual vessel reaches that speed, a sensing crystal within the device will shatter, setting the timer.

"Reaction time will commence approximately three minutes after we have pierced the barrier, assuming the Vulcan Spock's predictions to be correct. Our engineers concur. The reaction will backflow until it reaches the dilithium chambers themselves. At which point the *Enterprise* will disintegrate."

"An admirable plan with an admirable end," grinned Kor, retaking his seat. "Engineer Kanff has carried out the first half of the mission in producing the machine." His gaze wandered up to Lieutenant Kali. For a brief moment he considered virtues other than those of a top officer. It passed.

"The other half, Lieutenant, will be up to you."

"Yes, Commander. I have been briefed and understand what is needed. How will I recognize the diversion?"

Kor looked temporarily pained.

"Unfortunately, that is the one factor we cannot plan for in advance, Lieutenant. For it to succeed, it must be at least partly spontaneous in nature. The choice of the crucial moment will be up to you. However, there should be ample opportunity at the joint gathering this evening-time."

Kali's expression became one of disgust. "To mingle on a social basis with humans and Edoans and their kind," she almost spat. "It will be difficult to maintain an aura of civility, Commander."

"It is necessary to be more than civil, Lieutenant. We must endeavor to appear openly friendly." He eyed her sternly. "We can do nothing until we escape this trap. Remember that if your resolve weakens ... and smile."

"Yes, Exalted One," she answered compliantly.

Kaas handed her the tablet-sized machine. She took it carefully and tucked it away in a waistband pocket

"Tonight they entertain us," Kor observed, barely controlled excitement in his voice, "and so it is only just that we provide them with some entertainment ourselves. It will only last for a few milliseconds, but it should be most gratifying."

"If that device does what Engineer Kanff assures me it can," added Kaas, nodding in the direction of the now hidden tablet, "I almost regret that none on board the *Enterprise* will

have the opportunity to observe its entertaining capabilities at greater length."

IV

It was all the better for Kor's machinations that the party had been suggested by the psychology staffs of both the *Klothos* and the *Enterprise* and then mutually agreed upon by himself and Kirk. That should lull any suspicions of ulterior motives on the part of the Klingons.

The rationale behind the gathering was that since the Elysians felt so strongly about the personnel of both ships co-existing in harmony, it might be an excellent idea for them to observe members of both crews mingling in a spirit of good fellowship and cooperation - even if a little faking was required.

As a further indication of their desire to cooperate with their new friends, invitations had been extended from both ships for members of the council to attend. When locale had been called into question, Kor had magnanimously agreed to have the event staged on the *Enterprise*.

One of the large briefing rooms had been made over for the occasion. Klingon and Federation trappings were placed side by side. They did not blend well, since conflict carried over even into decorations.

Long tables were set up around the room and loaded with food and exotic drink from both ships. Natural antagonisms momentarily laid aside, the celebration commenced surprisingly well. Klingons, crewmembers of the *Enterprise*, and representatives of the Elysian council mingled easily in the large chamber.

Taped music played over the concealed speakers. At first it had been mostly martial Scottish music, angry fifes and drums, until Kirk ordered the selection changed over engineer Scott's objections.

Then the speakers poured forth a tape requested by Devna, the Orionite member of the council, and promptly turned out by the *Enterprise*'s vast library.

She was dancing in the center of the floor, to the admiring stares of numerous onlookers. Sounding clearly over the hum of constant chatter, the music was lush, full, impressionistic. Devna danced sensuously, completely relaxed. Only occasionally did a movement seem forced. It was as if she were desperately striving to demonstrate that there was a different side to her than the formal interpreter of laws who sat on the council.

Now she was interpreting with her body instead of her voice. There was nothing abstract in her movements. They were basic ... primal, even. The performance ended with a flurry of difficult moves lithely managed - ended with her lying prone on the floor.

There was applause, varying according to diverse styles of artistic appreciation. The music changed to something simple, gentle, purely melodic. Almost embarrassed, Devna made a slight bow and disappeared into the crowd, leaving the dance floor free for others to try their Terpsichorean skill.

Kirk was engaged in a somewhat forced conversation with one of the Klingon library technicians. He turned to speak to Devna as she hurried by. He was glad for the chance to break off the discussion without becoming insulting, finding it increasingly difficult to control his emotions around the Klingons. Their ever-present, unsubtle sense of supercilious superiority generated in him most undiplomatic urges.

"That was beautifully rendered," he told her.

"I thank you, Captain." She was barely breathing hard.

"Especially that grande finale."

Her eyes suddenly seemed to light, and a glow came into her face. "You've seen the dances of Orion before, then?"

Kirk nodded. "Many times. Always with pleasure, never without admiration."

"I wish..."

Interpreter of laws, council member or not, the look on her face was unmistakable.

"Wish what?" he prompted. She stared hard at him.

"I wish I could return through this space-time barrier and see Orion again. We tell, we lie, we say to ourselves," she continued tightly, "that homesickness is a mental abstraction and easily avoided. We have put our former lives behind us ... and so we have.

"But ... the walls we've built in front of those memories are not always as strong as we would wish them to be."

"You could go back," Kirk told her. "We're perfectly willing to take passengers."

"No," she said, gazing at him tiredly. "You see, we've all seen the absurdity of trying to escape. Many times each of us here dreamed of breaking out, till we came to understand it simply cannot be done. We have accepted our new lives here. To dwell on the possibility of returning is only to open emotional wounds best left closed. Such speculation is unhealthy."

"We're pretty sure it can be done," Kirk countered.

"Do you not think," she half shouted, "that each of us has not believed that same thing as intensely, as strongly as you? Did you not see the *Klothos* fail? Did you..." She stopped, staring at him.

"You still do not believe. You still fail to admit to reality. When fact has replaced dream, I will dance again for you, Captain Kirk. You will find, when you have been here a hundred years or so, that the appreciation and companionship of one's fellows is among the finest ends anyone can live for.

"Until then, I will intrude on your dream no longer."

"Funny," Kirk murmured. "I've always felt exactly the same way about appreciation and companionship on the other side of the space-time barrier."

She gave him a friendly, pitying smile of the sort usually bestowed on a stubborn child, turned and walked into the crowd, heading for the place where Xerius stood in earnest conversation with another council member - a Tallarine male, Kirk noted absently. He knew better than to go after her, better than to repeat his offer of escape.

Usually the outright refusal to consider another way of looking at something was a sign of advancing age. It appeared that physical deterioration of the body was not a prerequisite for turning so obstinate. Repeated discouragement would only contribute to such an attitude.

The music issuing from the speakers had turned faintly romantic. A number of couples were dancing on the floor now. There were also one or two triples.

Kirk might have intervened if he had seen what was happening across the room, but his view was blocked and no one else saw fit to step in. McCoy, overcome by the enforced spirit of the occasion, had imbibed rather too much. But so what if his emotional gauge was running a bit high? His judgment was unimpaired, he thought - and member of an inimical race or no, that Klingon lady was one of the most beautiful gals in the room.

The doctor made a gallant, if unsteady bow before her, smiled broadly.

"Miss ... would you care to dance?"

Not surprisingly, the offer took her utterly unawares. She made a pretense of looking away, in reality searching for Kor. He saw what was happening, nodded slightly. She forced a smile of her own and stood.

They started to shuffle around the floor - awkward in each other's arms at first, but with increasing steadiness. Kor broke off his conversation with one of the council members and slid over to where Kaas stood. His first officer had not noticed the unusual pairing yet. He was drinking and trying to avoid contact with any member of the *Enterprise* crew.

A few words were whispered, glances exchanged. Kaas waited until Kor had made his way across the floor and struck up a new conversation, this time with one of the Federation officers. Then he moved, starting out onto the dance floor, an angry, half-drunken glare dominating his expression.

A clutching hand, and McCoy found himself spun around to face the furious, weaving Kaas.

"Get away from her, human, this is my woman." Kali looked on quietly.

"Now just a minute," McCoy objected, his liquid amiability rapidly starting to fade. "All I did was ask her to dance. She didn't have to agree, and I certainly didn't..."

"She's my woman!" Kaas howled, not wanting to be distracted by facts. Most of his body weight was behind the wild swing he took at the doctor.

McCoy dodged the worst of it, still caught Kaas' fist in the side. He stumbled backward, over went a table laden with food and drink with a nerve-tingling crash. The taped music continued but now every eye in the room turned to them; every conversation ceased.

No one, not even the two security guards at the door, noticed the long-forgotten Kali slip out of the room through an open service hatch.

Gratified at the ease with which he had bowled over his unsuspecting opponent and not wanting to waste the opportunity, Kaas moved in quickly, hoping to get in a few damaging blows before they were separated.

He underestimated McCoy - a characteristic common to anyone who had ever fought the doctor hand to hand. McCoy had been knocked off balance, but he was more surprised by the sudden assault than hurt. And if his present condition was not analytical, it made him plenty combative.

He hit the first officer of the *Klothos* low, ramming his head into the other's midsection and knocking the wind out of him.

Grappling wildly, the two officers rolled over and over on the floor.

McCoy flailed away with enough enthusiasm to keep the frustrated, furious Kaas from either doing any damage or getting free. One wild elbow even caught the Klingon officer under the bridge of his nose, an exceptionally painful jolt that started blood flowing.

It was Kirk who got his arms around McCoy's shoulders and dragged him off Kaas.

"Bones, stop it!" McCoy was still weaving on his feet. "What the blazes happened?"

Kaas climbed to his feet. That's when he first noticed the blood trailing from his nose. At the sight of that, he forgot what he was doing on the floor, forgot his position, forgot everything.

He went for his concealed disruptor pistol.

"Stop!" came a booming voice from the back of the room. Xerius' commanding tone. Kaas didn't hear him, just as he didn't hear Kor's frantic cry of *"Khaba dej', Kaas!"* or the curse that followed. Roughly translated, it meant, "The idiot will ruin everything!"

Kor ran toward his first officer ... too late, he saw. The disruptor was already out and aimed at the two humans. Before anyone had a chance to reach Kaas, he fired.

The killing bolt faded into the air centimeters from McCoy's chest.

Kaas, startled not only by the failure of his pistol but by the sudden realization of what he had done, stared in confusion at the useless weapon. Before he could decide to fire, put the gun away, or do anything, Kor wrenched it from him. The first officer looked up slowly into his commander's eyes.

A milky gaze was fading rapidly from Kaas' corneas. He had been in a berserker frenzy. Kor struggled to control his own

emotions. Not the first officer's fault, really, considering that the other had unexpectedly drawn blood.

But what a time to let a little blood intervene!

"Captain Kirk and Commander Kor, and these two," intoned Xerius solemnly, "will come to the council chamber in two minutes to face charges." There was a flash ... several flashes. When Kirk and the others looked around, every member of the Elysian council had vanished.

The celebration had come to an end.

A low babble of conversation resumed in the room ... low and concerned. All hint of the enforced pleasantries of moments ago was gone. Members of the two crews now had something real to talk about - a common threat of unknown dimension.

Kali did not participate, however. By then she had successfully made her way into the central computer room of the *Enterprise*, avoiding the depleted security forces.

Using a packet of compact tools taken from another pocket, she removed a certain panel buried far back in the main complex. The components visible beyond the panel pulsed with faint, miniature auroras, by-products of the energies flowing through them.

The tablet-sized machine slid neatly into place, well back among a maze of interlocking circuitry. The device would have been even better located in one of the engine rooms, but security was impenetrable. According to the schematics on board the *Klothos*, this was the closest she could get without being challenged.

Engineer Kanff had calculated it would be more than close enough.

No one saw her replace the panel or leave the room. A dozen or so technicians, some from the *Enterprise*, some from the *Klothos*, were passing through the nearest corridor, moving to a new work area. Kali blended in neatly with them.

When they reached the work section, she joined two of her shipmates and fell to assisting them as best she could. They eyed her strangely, but said nothing. It was not meet to question the actions of a superior officer. They went silently about their business.

She had successfully carried out the crucial part of her mission. Now it remained only for her to wait and enjoy the spectacle to come.

***

There was no time to try and rig any kind of protective defensive field. It probably would not have been of much value. Previous experience had demonstrated that whatever transporter the Elysians possessed, it was perfectly capable of plucking any member of the crew off either the *Enterprise* or the *Klothos* any time the council wished.

So it was that once again Kirk and Kor, now accompanied by first officer Kaas and Dr. McCoy, found themselves standing in the cathedral-like council chamber before the assembled Elysians.

There was no attempt at explanation this time, no effort to make the visitors feel at ease. The enmity coming from the council was almost palpable. A feeling of decision that Kirk found frightening, hung in the air. There was to be no discussion or trial here. A decision of some sort had already been made.

In a place where there was an excess of only time, Xerius' speech was brief. "You have been informed. You have been warned. You have been instructed. And you know that any exercise of violence against another intelligent being is forbidden here." He glared at Kor.

"Your man began the fight and attempted to kill." Xerius looked around at his fellow council members. "I formally propose as penalty that we suspend the *Klothos* and its crew for a century of their time."

All his carefully constructed struts and buttresses supporting an intricately wrought plan had neatly been kicked out from under him when Kaas had lost his temper. Now Kor saw the foundation crumbling.

"My first officer was provoked," he protested, trying to project an air of outraged innocence. The excuse sounded lame. Xerius treated it with contempt.

"He attempted to kill - and would have, had we not prevented it at the final moment. There is no lesser penalty for such a crime."

"But I didn't know," Kaas objected. "I lost control of myself, saw only..."

"That will be enough," warned Xerius sharply. "You have spoken already ... with your actions."

"May I say something, then?" Kirk asked.

"You may, Captain Kirk."

He took a step toward the dais, thinking rapidly. As a starship command flight officer he was required to know a fair amount of law, but that had never been one of his favorite subjects at the Academy, though he had done well in it. With his no-nonsense analytical approach, Spock had the better courtroom manner.

But Spock was not here. Kirk would have to argue his case as best he could, alone.

"Captain Kor and I - as you probably know - are going to try and break through the time-space barrier tomorrow. If you put the *Klothos* and its crew into suspension, you'll be punishing us as much as them. We can't leave as a single ship.

"I implore you to let our dual craft make this attempt as we've planned."

"This futile attempt at escape is so important to you?" Xerius was saying. "Despite what we have told you, that it is foredoomed to failure?"

"I repeat, we don't share your eternal pessimism. However you choose to see it ... yes, it's that important to us."

"You *will* fail."

"We *must* try," Kirk pressed desperately. "Xerius," he went on, hoping the council leader didn't think he was being lectured, "in many respects, Elysia is a perfect society. It had endured a thousand years and proven that when given a chance, the most antagonistic peoples can live together in peace." And when given no other choice, he thought.

"But with all its virtues, it's not home. And with all its faults, we would prefer to return to our own continuum."

Far down the dais, Devna was heard to murmur, "As would many of us."

Xerius pretended not to hear.

"You insist on taking these would-be murderers with you?"

"I'd be lying if I didn't admit that Commander Kor and I regard each other with something less than brotherly affection," he admitted. Kor smiled toothily.

"But sometimes an injured man has to take medication that's not very pleasant, yet necessary to his survival. That's my situation regarding the *Klothos*."

Kirk's argument was simple and logically irrefutable. And so, after studying both men for several long moments, Xerius gave a reluctant nod.

"Very well. I release Commander Kor and First Officer Kaas into your custody, Captain Kirk." He looked sternly at both Klingons. "After your absurd escape attempt fails, the penalty will be carried out - should you survive."

Kor forced himself to fight down his triumphant smile and look nominally repentant. It wasn't too hard. If the Vulcan Spock's calculations proved inaccurate, the penalty might just as well be carried out. Better to sleep than be forced to endure an eternity of this repugnant civility - especially with humans and other Federation grass eaters!

"Lest you believe we think you ill fortune, I wish you good luck, Captain Kirk," the council leader finished.

***

"Preparations are completed," Kor announced.

Kirk looked up at the viewscreen. The image of Commander Kor stared back at him from his position on the bridge of the *Klothos*. A precision universal chronometer was mounted on one arm of the Klingon commander's chair and was synchronized to the one on the *Enterprise*. They had finished the conjoining work with several hours to spare.

"Ready here." Kirk turned his attention to the rising black band on the chair chronometer, watched it reach a preset numeral. At the instant it did so, there was a buzz from the helm. A preliminary check, successful. Helm and navigation instrumentation on both ships were properly linked.

"Manual timing checks," Kirk reported.

Now nothing was left but to feed power to test Spock's theory.

Sulu was watching him, waiting.

"Prepare to accelerate to warp-six, Mr. Sulu."

"Standing by, sir."

"Ready to compute subordinate corrections if required, Captain," Arex said crisply.

"Communications standing by," Uhura added.

"Computer backup ready." Spock, relaxed, at ease.

Kirk glanced down at the chronometer set in his own chair-arm, silently counted off the seconds: three, two, one, accelerate.

A barely perceptible vibration ran through the deck as preset automatics took over and the linked ships suddenly leaped ahead, accelerating steadily.

***

Two members of the Elysian council stood in the otherwise deserted chamber and stared at the flowmetal screen which had appeared behind the council dais. Long-range monitors mounted on long-abandoned craft kept the *Enterprise-Klothos* in sight as it moved out of the ship cluster.

Devna and Xerius stared at the picture. As they watched, a third counselor entered, eyes going to the screen. Silver cataracts slid over Megan's eyes as her gaze reached outward.

"Escape," she mumbled. "All are concentrating on escape. Their ships move ever faster.

"Kirk of the *Enterprise* expresses confidence in the work of his technicians and engineers, in the ability of his first officer.

"Kor of the *Klothos*, too, exudes confidence in his personnel and in..."

Both hands went to her temples. She stumbled backward.

"No! The Klingons - have hidden an explosive device aboard the *Enterprise*. The picture is in Commander Kor's mind. She will be destroyed. She will..."

Xerius and Devna came out of shock simultaneously. It was the council speaker who moved first, clutched at the controls of the concealed microphone. Spoke frantically while staring at the screen.

"Intership emergency, intership emergency!"

"Power Control acknowledges, Speaker," a voice responded.

"Full broadcast to the fleeing starships, tight-beam message to the *Enterprise*."

There was a pause, then..., "Probing, Xerius. They do not answer."

"Keep trying ... give me an open channel. *Enterprise*, this is Speaker Xerius. Respond, *Enterprise*! You are in..."

***

Descent into the Maelstrom, Kirk mused as the whirlpool of light that delineated the space-time barrier appeared on the screen. A wavering cyclone of force they were rushing toward.

Unconsciously, both hands dug tighter into the arms of the command chair. True, the *Klothos* had tried the barrier, been rejected, and survived. But perhaps they were moving so supremely fast that this time the barrier would reject them with less care. His grip didn't relax.

"Warp-seven, Captain," Sulu reported.

"Everyone brace for resistance as we contact the barrier field," Kirk ordered unnecessarily.

"Sir!" Uhura's voice. "Xerius is trying to contact us. The call is coming on an emergency frequency."

"Put it on the main speaker, Lieutenant." She nudged a switch, and the speaker's voice immediately sounded on the bridge.

"Captain Kirk, the Klingons have secreted an explosive device of small size but tremendous triggering power in your ... in your computer chambers. Megan reports it is located at ... a moment ... she is attempting to read..."

The intercom went silent. Kirk's stomach was doing acrobatics.

"It is located," the speaker said, voice contact returning, "in the casement housing auxiliary power leads to the drive

chamber. It will activate when you reach warp-eight. If it is not removed before then, it cannot be deactivated. It must then be removed carefully, according to Megan's reading of its internal structure, or ... (fizzle, sput) ... racinatio..."

"Outer fringe of the barrier is disrupting communications, sir," Uhura reported.

"Stay with it, Lieutenant. Spock, Scotty." Both officers were already halfway to the elevator. Kirk punched a switch on his chair console.

"Computer room ... Captain speaking ... give me the tech in charge."

Brief pause, then, "Rodino here, Captain."

"Commander Spock and the chief are on their way back there to perform some surgery. Remove all access plates to the drive power leads, auxiliary casement. Don't touch anything else ... move, Rodino."

"Computer out," came the fast reply.

While the attention of the *Enterprise*'s command was otherwise engaged, their counterparts on the *Klothos* were intent on the main viewscreen. Their alert system had begun to sound, as it had once before only a few days ago.

"Approaching warp-eight, Exalted One," Kaas noted from his position at the science station.

A new sound began to penetrate the bridge, a sound Kor had listened to recently - just prior to being thrown into unconsciousness. A high, wailing roar generated by forces which existed in contempt of all natural law. A wild, thunderous moan which once heard was never to be forgotten. Not by Kor, nor by any member of the *Enterprise*'s crew, now subjected to the same buffeting.

"The barrier," the commander muttered, staring at the light storm ahead. They were close to it, now.

"He didn't specify *which* auxiliary leads it was behind, damn it," Scott rumbled tightly. Shoving the startled Rodino aside, the chief engineer had gone through the first such section. With blatant disregard for everything the manual said and for years of training, he ripped at connections and leads, oblivious to the chances of shock or to the damage he was doing.

The first panel he searched showed nothing, nor the second. Delicate circuitry was shoved aside by the small combination tool in his right hand. He started in on the third, nudging aside a minor knot of microcircuits, probably deactivating someone's favorite entertainment channel.

That could be fixed ... later. Right now he wanted a look a little deeper into the casement. Something seemed to be reflecting a touch too much light back there. Then he saw it A small cylindrical section about the size and shape of a large pill.

"There it is, Spock. I'll hold the lines aside."

Spock dropped to his knees as Scott moved slightly aside. Spock moved his arm into the opening. Gently, two fingers slid around the tablet, lifted, pulled it slowly from its resting place by a double-fluid circuit.

He had it.

Seconds later, both men were standing, examining the compact device. Spock imprinted its exterior design, consistency, weight, color, shape in his mind for future study. Then he moved to a boldly marked slot at the far end of the chamber. A disposal niche.

There were three switches set in the wall beside it. One labeled DISINTEGRATE, the second marked RECYCLE and the third, was covered by a snapdown protective top.

Spock flipped the red plastic up and placed the innocuous-seeming tablet in the open niche. Then he pressed the uncovered button. The red label alongside it read: POWER EJECT.

Despite the coolness on the bridge, Kirk found he was sweating. A vibration that did not come from the engines now rattled the deck beneath them, shook the arms of his chair where he gripped it. A teeth-scratching screech screamed over the speakers and seemed to dig into his bones, despite Uhura's attempts to moderate it.

There was a sudden sharp jolt. Inside his skull a little voice chuckled, said, "Nice try, James T. ... goodbye..."

Then without any warning, the vibration stopped, the high-pitched wail trailed off into a drifting sigh, and the view forward became awesomely normal - a vision of familiar stars and nebulae. The view was infinitely more glorious than the claustrophobic immortality they had left behind.

As prearranged, a single relay snapped over on board both ships. It begat a multitude of tiny clicks and snaps as beams, cables, and plates parted - sometimes softly, other times with the aid of tiny explosive bolts.

The *Enterprise-Klothos* fissioned, each half arching off in opposite directions.

Unrestrained cheering indicated the emotions on the *Klothos*' bridge. Anyone would have thought the crew had just won a major battle against overwhelming odds. In a sense, they had.

Her commander and first officer stared expectantly at the viewscreen in anticipation of further pyrotechnics. Long-range scanners struggled to hold the fast-moving dot that was the *Enterprise*.

For a moment, something seemed to have gone wrong. Then there was an impressive flowering of violet light. The cheering died quickly as the rest of the crew turned in surprise to gape at this new phenomenon. First one gaze, then another, and another, turned toward the command station.

"Exalted One," Kaas said formally, "this is a great moment for the Empire. May I have the honor of...?"

"Not yet, not yet," Kor countered thoughtfully. "Give everyone time to think on it. Let them reach the proper conclusion by themselves. The result will be that much more pleasurable for them. We can confirm it at our leisure. I want to enjoy this as long as possible."

His predatory smile widened as he watched the angry flare fade from the screen...

***

To see familiar stars again was a pleasure Kirk had not expected.

No, no ... that was not true. Inside, he had always really believed they would successfully escape the continuum trap - no matter how many times the Elysians had failed. There wasn't a barrier in the universe that Spock, Sulu, Arex and Scott couldn't break once they set their combined brainpower to searching for a solution.

That belief had wavered only once ... when the *Klothos* had tried the barrier and failed. Maybe he had felt so sure about it because they had never really been threatened. Kirk was used to facing down death - the promise of eternal life was something hard to feel terrified about.

Uhura interrupted his musings. He noted a calmness in her voice again that no promise of extended life could put there.

"Sir, I'm picking up a deep-space transmission at the extreme range of reception. It's from the *Klothos*." She paused. "Commander Kor is heading for his home station - there, they've just passed outside our effective communications limit."

"Don't keep us in suspense, Lieutenant," Kirk prompted. "What's the good commander done? Probably taken full credit for our escape from the time-space trap."

Uhura seemed to be having trouble controlling herself. "It's not ... that, Captain. They saw the device they planted aboard go off and apparently they felt it was still aboard.

"He thinks we've been destroyed - and he was trumpeting his triumph all the way back to Klingon Imperial Headquarters!"

"Commander Kor is exhibiting the typical egocentrism of..." Spock stopped, observed that Kirk, Sulu and even Arex were now sharing in Uhura's laughter. A steady high-pitched noise of a less ominous sort now permeated the bridge.

"I had thought that if such information inspired emotion in you," he said uncertainly, "it would have been of anger and not amusement."

"Don't you see, Spock?" Kirk turned to him, trying to retain his composure.

"See what, Captain?" The first officer was still confused.

"Consider what Kor is reporting, is claiming, Spock ... and then try to visualize his face when the Empire's emissaries in the Federation send back word that we are still in excellent condition!"

Spock glanced around the usually efficient, smoothly running bridge. It had taken on the air of a carnival. He turned back to his console.

There was a certain problem in abstract mathematics he had been working on. He would return to a consideration of it now. But first he reviewed Kirk's explanation. The incongruity of the situation he perceived, of course. But he would not, if he lived to be a thousand, understand how it could produce in normally sensible human beings a state of transitory imbecility.

In response to his request, the computer laid the details of the problem before him once again. Bending his gaze to his hooded viewer, he found relief from the surrounding hysteria in the cool perfection of higher calculus. He was not, however, isolated in his reaction to the situation.

Had he known, it is quite likely that Commander Kor would not have been laughing, either...

THE AMBERGRIS ELEMENT

(Adapted from a script by Margaret Armen)

I

(Sun to Queen four plus two)

"Starrfleet Academy?" M'mar murmured wonderingly. "You werre trrained as a historrian, daughterr. Historry, sociology, anthrropology ... those werre yourr forrtes in school. Not physics or spatial engineerring or some such."

M'ress' mother reclined on the lounge, her expression one of concern, feline pupils of carved jet narrowed against the warm evening day of mid-summerset on Cait.

"Is it something else that's led you to this line of thinking, daughterr? Perrhaps something else trroubles you ... that boy, now..."

M'ress made a soft sigh of exasperation. "It has nothing to do with N'nance, materr. Orr with V'rrone, orr D'irraj, orr any of my frriends. I've simply decided that..."

"You've *decided*," M'mar whispered half to herself.

"...I want to learrn morre about people as they arre now instead of how they've been. Is that so surrprrising? Becoming a Federration Starrfleet officerr is the best way to do that."

"And what about yourr litterr mates? What do they think of this sudden switch in mid-stalk?"

M'ress looked smug. "Sister M'nass thinks I'm as crrazy as you do, but both brrotherr M'rest and M'sitt say it's wonderful ... and typically me."

"They'rre half rright," M'mar muttered. "Take carre, M'ress. As eldest of the litterr, you have a rresponsibility to set good examples forr them. Considerr that whateverr you do is likely to be copied."

"I rrealize that, materr," M'ress replied, tail flicking nervously from side to side. It was that very thought which had caused her to delay the announcement this long. "But I'm determined on this thing."

M'mar eyed her daughter appraisingly, but M'ress refused to break the stare. "All rright then," she finally conceded, "if you'rre bound on it, trry yourr best. By the Prrey, yourr academic evaluations are high enough. But bewarre, daughter, you could end up on a satellite-to-planet shuttle in some farr corrnerr of the galaxy and see no morre in a lifetime than that one corrnerr."

"I'm not worrried about that, materr," M'ress countered, with the confidence of the young. "One thing at a time. Firrst I have to get into the Academy."

"And if you can't, despite yourr evaluations?"

"Then I'll apply forr ttraining as common crrew, of courrse," she said matter-of-factly.

M'mar offerred the ultimate Caitian argument. "This will separrate the family."

Now M'ress was forced to look away, and her voice dropped. "I know, materr, but this is something I have in my hearrt and mind to trry. Paterr will underrstand."

"Yourr crrazy sirre underrstands everrything!" M'mar half spat. "You inherrited yourr foolishness from him! He even pretends to underrstand yourr poetrry." She quieted abruptly, held out a paw to stroke her daughter's forehead with. "Naturrally, we'll both brreak ourr dewclaws to help you make it...."

***

(Satellite four to Probe six less one)

"The branch classifications have been posted!"

Lena, the human cadet-aspirant with whom M'ress was quartered at the Academy, burst into the room. Her face was flushed, her breath racing.

Instantly the hair on M'ress' neck rose. Her tail flicked from side to side, bottled up. Lena caught her breath long enough to answer her roommate's unasked question.

"We both made the twenty percent cut. That's all I know, Kit."

M'ress relaxed to the point of collapse. Only the top fifth of all applicants who were accepted to Starfleet were passed on for the full multi-year course of training. Now the arduous six-month ordeal of endless tests - physical as well as mental - was over ... and she had made it, she had actually made it!

Almost as one they reached for the switch which would activate the tiny computer screen each room came equipped with. Lena hit it first. The rectangle lit, and the words awaiting input appeared. At that point the enormity of their accomplishment supplanted the initial excitement, and the fear that it was all a dream took over.

"You do it, Lena ... you firrst."

"No ... I can't. All of a sudden, I can't."

"I'll rriddle you forr it."

"Oh no!" Lena grinned warily. "You're much too good at word games for me." She let her gaze travel around the immaculately kept room, eventually spotted the ancient toy top resting on the pile of workbooks.

"I'll spin you a dredel for it."

"Orrf! All rright ... choose sides."

They did so. Lena spun the tiny top on the counter in front of the screen. "Gimel," M'ress chortled triumphantly. "I win."

"You always win, Kit," Lena grumbled, but only briefly. After all, they had both made the cut. She punched out her name with the attendant request for information.

An ultra-rapid series of pictures blurred the screen as the desk-top brain hunted through the records. Finally, an immensely detailed chart - Lena Goldblum reduced to numerical molecules - appeared.

"One thousand eighty-three," she read from the blow-up of the bottom line.

Excellent out of ten thousand ... about average among those who would advance. And of the two thousand, only twenty percent again would graduate ... *the* Four Hundred.

"Not too good, but I have plenty of time to bring it up," she observed confidently.

"Yes, and that's betterr than -"

"And look!" Lena shouted excitedly. "I've been approved for my first request, security training!"

Two numbers, M'ress thought, that would determine their lives for the next several years. Class ranking and section. Two numbers.

"Now you, Kit."

M'ress made the request. Again the high-speed hunt, again the computer settled on the necessary card.

It was hard to say which girl was the more flabbergasted.

"M'ress," Lena gulped, "I never knew." She looked at her roommate for half a year as if she were seeing her for the first time.

There it was ... class ranking: 0022.

"Means nothing," M'ress whispered. "Someone always has to rrank numberr one and someone has to rrank ten thousand.

They'rre not absolutes ... just rroughs. Just a convenient statistical abstrract for the administrration."

"But, M'ress..." Lena stopped, sensing a sudden shift in her friend's attitude. "Kit, what's wrong? Sure it's only a rough number, but even so, aren't you pleased?"

"Look." M'ress pointed to the other critical number. It translated as: COMMUNICATIONS. "I wanted Science Section," she growled bitterly. "Administrrative science with a culturral anthrro over-majorr leading to executive officerrship and eventual Captaincy."

"Practically everyone wants administration and a chance at command, Kit," said Lena comfortingly. "You know how pitifully few even get a *chance* to try for it There's always the possibility of a field commission, though."

"In communications?" M'ress cried.

"Look, at least you've got a chance to reach the Bridge. That's a lot closer than I'll ever get. Of course, I know I would never have it upstairs for command anyway."

She forced a smile.

"Maybe the computer read some of your poetry."

M'ress had to smile at that.

"I suppose I should be thrilled even to pass on. But I've been making rrankings like that all my life and you get to expect them afterr a while."

"This is Starfleet Academy though, M'ress," Lena reminded her. "Not some - excuse me - provincial school."

"That's so," M'ress was forced to admit. She brightened. "Yes, by the Prrey, I ought to be prroud, and excited, *mrrrr!* Ssst ... if I have to worrk my way up thrrough communications, then it's thrrough communications I'll worrk."

"That's the spirit," encouraged Lena.

"And I'm going to keep on with my poetrry, too ... no matter wherre it puts me in the mind of some central collection of solenoids and scrrews."

***

(Sun to Black Star ... even!)

"M'ress ... we've been hit, badly!"

M'ress looked up from her seat at the library viewer and stared anxiously at Ankee, the short, stocky Jarite engineering ensign who had become one of her closest companions on the heavy cruiser Hood. Their sections were totally different in function, as were their individual assignments; but they shared a deep and abiding interest in the construction of reform-era poetry.

Now he looked exhausted, badly battered about one side of his head, and a little scared.

"I felt a slight shudder, Ankee, but I didn't think ... I only heard the yellow alert sound and saw no harm in continuing with this work."

"Surprise attack," he told her tiredly. "No one had time to do more than react instinctively. Not even time to sound battle stations." He added, seeing her brow furrow, "Kzinti."

"Oh, we hit back at them, all right. Knocked out both engines, from what I hear; and scuttlebutt has it she's lost a lot of atmosphere, but...," he paused worriedly, "there's been no further word from the Bridge in some time."

"*What* Bridge?"

M'ress looked past Ankee as her friend turned. Lieutenant Morax was standing in the doorway, fighting to keep from shaking. Despite his three legs, the soft-voiced security officer looked none too stable.

"The Bridge is gone."

"What?" both ensigns gasped simultaneously.

"Gone," Morax continued to mutter, in a tone that hinted he still didn't accept it himself. "Just ... gone. Captain Oxley, Commander Umba, Lieutenant Commander D'Uberville ... everybody."

"Then who's in command?" wondered M'ress. "That would leave..."

Morax shook his head sadly. "Chief Ellis was on the bridge, too. Which means -"

"You," Ankee put in.

"Me. Believe me, it's an honor I could do without."

"What happened?" M'ress pressed.

Morax made a complicated gesture. "The first attack. Direct hit on the Bridge by a disruptor bolt before we could get our screens up. We missed deflecting it by seconds. Too long." The security chief seemed about to cry.

"What's ourr status?" M'ress asked tightly.

"Engines disabled, Bridge gone, Fire Control scrambled to hell and gone. "We're a derelict," Morax told them. "The Kzanti's in little better shape. You know what that means."

"Open to salvage," Ankee said huskily.

M'ress had moved quickly to the tiny computer console. She cleared off her work, project - three weeks' study gone, no time to mourn - ran through several shunting operations while the other two watched. She tried again, a third time, finally quit in disgust.

"I could have told you," Morax said sympathetically, "our communications are completely gone, as well."

"So," guessed Ankee, "we sit here, both ships drifting forever in space, unless by accident..."

"No, Ensign," Morax cut in. "The Kzinti is totally disabled from a mobility standpoint, true. Offensively, true. But our remaining backup sensory equipment indicates they are managing to put out a signal - faint, but a signal nonetheless - toward their nearest relay station.

"We're deep in Federation territory, but we might as well be on the Galactic rim since we can't generate a similar signal. When theirs is picked up, it'll send another Kzinti warship racing here. They'll take the Hood in tow, after disposing of any inconvenient vermin who happen to be witnesses, of course."

"So that's it, then," cursed Ankee fatalistically, slumping in the portal. "No way of fighting back. We can't run and we can't fight - we can't even call for help. But they can."

M'ress was thinking furiously, then she asked, "What arre you going to rrecommend?"

"A great deal of prayer," Morax replied. He turned to leave.

"There's another possibility. Less spiritual, but with a betterr chance of succeeding, I think."

Morax stopped, gaped at her.

"Come now, Ensign, I..."

"No, rreally - if you'rre cerrtain the Kzinti communications arre still intact."

"We've got a definite indication they're putting out a signal," the security chief replied. "It will take some time to reach a Kzinti border relay post, considering the lack of power behind it. But it will reach."

"So," M'ress went on, "if we could get contrrol of that same transmitter and beam to one of ourr stations, a Federration vessel would get herre in half the time the nearrest Kzin could."

She waited while Ankee and Morax exchanged puzzled glances.

"I'm not sure what you're proposing, Ensign," Morax said finally, "but if it's what I think, I absolutely..."

She slid out of the chair, came to the door. Her words were low, urgent. "You've got no choice, 'Acting Captain Morrax.'

"We Caitains and the Kzinti sharre common genetic rroots in the farr past, as do the Vulcans and the RRomulans. With a little carreful makeup, I could pass for a Kzin. A small one, but pass I would. Communications arre my specialty. With Lieutenant Tavi gone...," she swallowed stiffly, "I'm the best qualified to trry this.

"I can speak Kzin well enough to fool theirr own warr council. And the last thing they'll be expecting is a boarrding party of one. Now, what's ourr trransporrter capability?"

"I haven't had time to check," began Morax, "but..."

"Then find out, and if anything still worrks, have someone stand by to beam me aboarrd when I'm rready. If I can rreach theirr station and hold it long enough to get a single burrst off towarrd the Cetacea system..."

"How long," protested Ankee, "do you think you could hold such a spot against an aroused bunch of Kzinti? Against even one Kzin?"

"All I need is a couple of minutes to re-align the directional antenna - they've got to be using the dirrectional, otherrwise one of ourr patrrols might pick up theirr signal - and get off one little scrream."

"And after that?" wondered a worried Morax. "What about the chances of our beaming you back aboard when you're finished - in one piece. The odds..."

"Let us not exerrt ourrselves with minorr details, acting Captain," she cut in. "I don't want anyone retrieving me until I signal back that I'm good and rready, too."

"Well," she added, when neither officer essayed anything further, "arre you both of a sudden tongueless?"

Ankee stared at the deck while Morax ... Morax looked exceedingly unhappy.

"If there were another way, no matter how extreme or unlikely the chance of success ... You know what the Kzinti would do to you?"

"Morre details," she snapped, but trembling inside. "As you arre well awarre, there is no other way." She started past them. "I'm going down to Recreation. Someone down therre ought to be able to make me up.

"Meanwhile, acting Captain, you might have someone go overr the interrnal schematic of a Kzinti crruiser. It won't help if I'm set down in the middle of one of theirr interrogation chamberrs."

Against all probabilities - against all hopes and prayers and reasonableness - the scheme worked.

Of course, as soon as the signal was changed and beamed out toward Federation territory, other Kzinti on board the warship got wind of what was happening.

Still, M'ress almost got away unscathed, thanks to the timely and incredibly precise manipulations of the officer manning the transporter controls.

Almost.

Fortunately, the majority of scars were correctable by surgery, the others cosmetically concealed. The cause in which they were obtained was the reason why after only two short years on active duty, Ensign M'ress was promoted to the rank of lieutenant and assigned the prestigious post of alternate communications officer on board the *U.S.S. Enterprise*.

Actually, the hardest part had not been making it through Starfleet Academy, nor had it been the deception she'd so devastatingly performed on the Kzinti.

No, the hardest part had been the steady separation from the traditionally close-knit Caitian family. She smiled to herself. Her mater had been right about her setting an example for her younger sister and brothers; all three were now serving in Starfleet in various capacities. So M'mar had learned to bear up under the honor of having not one but four kits achieve officer grade in Starfleet.

A litter of warriors and militarists, she'd raised - she often grumbled. But privately, she was proud, proud.

And her sire, M'nault, wasn't private about it.

***

(White Satellite to Black Sun two, plus one. Check)

"Check."

M'ress blinked, looked up across the multilevel game board.

"There's a great deal on your mind, Lieutenant," observed the concerned figure seated across from her, "besides your next moves. If you wish, we can continue the game at another time."

"You'rre rright, Mrr. Spock. I wasn't concentrrating."

Spock pushed his chair back, rose. He touched a switch set in the top of the game table. The blue striping on the table rim slowly turned bright red, an indication that there was a game in suspension on it and no one should disturb the pieces.

"I do not like to pry, but your concentration was so intense - if I can do anything..."

"It's nothing, Mrr. Spock." She let out a deep, purring sigh. "Nothing at all, rreally. Some unimporrtant memorries, that's all."

Spock studied her skeptically, but elected not to pursue the matter any further. Not that the intimate details of M'ress' history or her mental preoccupations intrigued him so much.

But as a student of intelligent behavior, he was curious as to what "minor" matters could distract an outstanding player like M'ress to the point where she would make several moves as foolish as her last.

Such a thing would never happen to him, of course,

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Kirk was concluding a log entry as Spock entered the bridge. The first officer of the *Enterprise* moved to stand near the command chair, at ease and at the ready, while Kirk dictated. The captain noticed his arrival, acknowledged it with a barely perceptible nod and continued on without a break.

The subject of said log entry was currently visible on the main screen: a smallish, intensely blue-green globe. The light of a modest G-type star reflected phosphorescently back from the spines of interminable ocean. Misty cloud cover added an angelic air to the scene.

The planet's name was Argo. It was one of a surprising multitude of water worlds thus far discovered in the explored section of the Galaxy.

Argo's one peculiarity worth remarking on - and worth the *Enterprise*'s presence here - was that until quite recently (according to drone probe analysis), it had been largely a landed planet. Now its surface was ninety-seven percent water.

No great ice caps had melted to cause this; no mythological Terran forty days and forty nights of rain had fallen. According to the data relayed back over the indifferent light-years to Starfleet Science Center by the drones, this world had been subjected to a series of evenly spaced seismic convulsions - intense without being cataclysmic - in a very brief span of time.

Forty days and forty nights of tectonic activity, perhaps. The fact that these convulsions had caused the major land masses to subside and vanish beneath the waves was not especially remarkable, Spock mused. It was the time factor which made

Argo a world worth a second, more detailed look. That, and the chance that such emergence - subsidence activity might be cyclic in nature. Because there was at least one other, well-populated, world in the Federation which gave hints of being similar to Argo.

A number of techniques for dealing with such subsidings on a selective basis had been developed, but only in theory. To put them into practice would require a world like the inhabited one. Since the inhabitants of the planet in question frowned on experimentation with the planetary crust and other such intimate chunks of their home, a substitute world had to be located.

Argo was such a world ... maybe. If so, the *Enterprise* might have a chance to try out some of those hopefully effective techniques.

Kirk wrapped up the entry, flipped off the recorder and glanced up at Spock.

As some sort of comment appeared to be in order, the Vulcan ventured, "Hardly the sort of world one would expect to be riven at any moment from core to surface, Captain."

Kirk nodded, and his gaze shifted to the screen. "No, Mr. Spock. It certainly seems placid enough on the surface. It's what's under the surface that'll be interesting. But we'll make the standard on-site survey first."

"Very good, Captain."

Kirk rose and both men started for the door.

They might, Kirk mused as the elevator took them toward the shuttle hanger, simply have beamed down with life-support belts to maintain them. The force-fields would keep them supplied with sufficient air while preventing them from drowning.

The trouble was, movement in a liquid environment while encased in a personal support field was peculiarly awkward. And mechanical transportation, would be far faster.

The small door slid aside and they strode into the cavernous hangar. Two men met them by the water shuttle. One - young, brown-haired, Lincolnesque-bearded and mellow-voiced - saluted: Lieutenant Clayton, their pilot.

His companion simply smiled. "Hello, Jim. Hello, Spock."

"You're coming with us, Doctor?" asked Spock.

"No, Spock," McCoy shot back. "I'm here to evaluate the possibilities of flooding the shuttle hangar five centimeters deep so that when the shuttle departs, the water will freeze solid and we'll have the largest interstellar skating rink in existence."

Spock paused a moment, considered thoughtfully, finally observed cautiously, "You are being sarcastic again, Doctor."

"It's observational capabilities like that which make me glad that at least one competent observer is going on this trip."

"Three, actually, Doctor," Spock continued, "but we will not be offended if you come along anyway."

Kirk cut off McCoy's inevitable riposte by starting for the shuttle with the young lieutenant in tow. "Clayton?"

"Sir?"

"How long," and he gestured at the nearing craft, "since you piloted one of these?"

"It's been a while, sir," the subordinate replied readily, "but as designated shuttle pilot for this mission, I've been reviewing the appropriate tapes and techniques for the last several weeks."

Kirk muttered something inaudible, turned back before entering. "All right. Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy ... if you're quite finished?"

The long ovoid shape of the shuttle was broken only by a clear plexalloy dome set midway back on its top. One section

of this was raised. A small retractable stairway led into it. Spock, McCoy and Clayton followed the captain into the crew section.

While the three senior officers settled into thickly padded seats set into the bulkheads, Clayton eased himself into the one adjustable one that faced the instrument panel. He ignored the conversation of his superiors and concentrated instead on running a final check of the internal computer, phaser controls, and their inorganic relatives.

"Is this trip really necessary, Jim?" asked McCoy over the beeps and hums of the responding components. "Not that I'm complaining, mind. I'm tickled for the chance to get a look at another water world. Fascinating ecologies on all of them. But can't we get all the information on seismic abberations from onboard instrumentation?"

"Yes, Bones. But the regs say that any world holding life bigger than a bacterium and more complex than a coelenterate requires at least one hands-on survey by a visiting ship. It's especially necessary in this case. You know how much trouble drone probes have getting accurate data on the life of water planets."

"That's true, Jim," McCoy admitted, "even so..." The clear voice of Lieutenant Clayton cut him off.

"Ready, Captain."

"All right, Lieutenant, when you're set."

Clayton manipulated controls. Slowly, majestically, the two massive doors of the hangar deck began to drift apart, moving with the ease and speed of milkweed seeds in an autumn breeze. Ebony blackness speckled with brilliant pinpoints of light backed the stage. The blue-green-glowing principal performer lay below them and slightly to starboard.

The lieutenant was as good as his word - and his homework. He had a little trouble handling the entry into the atmosphere, but that was understandable. Kirk said nothing. The shuttle

had been designed with underliquid maneuverability first in mind, in-flight navigability second.

Once they had penetrated the shifting cloud cover and Clayton had gotten the feel of the little ship in atmosphere, the operation grew gratifyingly smooth.

With a single exception, the surface of Argo in this region was wholly water. The shuttle skimmed low over roiling swells - all shades of blue and green that endless ocean was: azure, cerulean, deep turquoise; emerald, periodot, and flashing olivine. And where a wave crested, broke, the sea turned to amber foam flecked with white.

A strong concentration of mineral salts would be needed to stain the water that orange-brown hue - manganese, perhaps, Kirk thought.

The single exception hove into view: an island now, once the topmost crags of some mountain range. Stone exploded from the sea like a hallucinatory vision of a medieval castle. Battlements of naked basalt and porphyry offered challenge to endless legions of siege-waves, and amber moss festooned the rock-turrets with the banners of still defiant land.

Clusters of brilliant-hued shells rested in niches and crevices of the rock, and some shone phosphorescent even in the strong light of day. The amber color was prevalent here, too. It seemed to engulf the island and form a secondary atmosphere above the sea.

Not manganese then, Kirk thought. Whatever peculiar trace minerals were present here in ocean and air were likely as not alien to Earthly chemistry. He hoped the shuttle's recorder-sampler was operating at peak efficiency.

Assuredly, there was more of interest here than occasional earthquakes.

Clayton adjusted controls and the shuttle cut speed, eased downward to a damp landing. They hit gently and then slid smoothly toward the island.

They lay in the lee of the prevailing current, the island serving as shield, so here the surface was unusually smooth. As the shuttle came to a halt, Kirk and the others unfastened themselves from the protective seats.

McCoy and Spock moved to the storage lockers, started to remove the equipment they would need to properly sample what lived and was lived upon on Argo. But it was the enchanting vision of an accidental island that drew Kirk's attention.

He moved forward to stand by the busy Clayton. Through the plexalloy the jagged bastions now towering nearby resembled more than ever an impregnable repository of watery secrets. The dark shadow it cast on the otherwise unmarred ocean looked unnatural and faintly forbidding.

"Spock?"

The first officer looked over from where he was carefully constructing a small, self-powered mesh. It would skim the surface outside the shuttle for microscopic life and return automatically when full.

"Yes, Captain?"

"This is the largest remaining land mass on the planet, isn't it?"

"Yes, Captain." Spock turned back to his work, continued speaking as he fitted another part. "There are other outcroppings, but all are smaller than this. Yet according to readings taken from the ship, the ocean bottom hereabouts is fairly close to the surface. This suggests that the subsidence was unequal in places - or else we are floating above what would be regarded as a monstrously high plateau on Earth or on Vulcan. I think the irregular subsidence theory the more likely."

"I suggest," McCoy broke in, "that we stop debating theory and get down to some practical work ... like obtaining some specimens."

"For once I agree with you, Doctor," Spock responded. Kirk smiled.

"Lieutenant Clayton, open the hatch and let our two impatient scientists get on with their business."

"Aye, sir." He reached toward the side-mounted lever which would raise the entranceway of the dome. As he did so, McCoy gestured sharply to port.

"What's that?"

"I don't see anything, Doctor," Spock said, studying the indicated spot.

"There's something in the water there," McCoy countered, beginning to feel like a mighty fool. Had he seen something or not? "There, see where the water is fountaining slightly?"

McCoy's fears of seeming a fool were put to rest by a wild churning and frothing at the indicated place. They were supplanted seconds later by more tangible fears as a brace of enormous tentacles broke the surface and hooked down like a pair of gargantuan anacondas to embrace the shuttle in a crushing grip.

Kirk was yelling something about activating the engine, but whatever had them was shaking the shuttle violently and his words were lost in the steady banging about.

Released from their protective loungers the four men tumbled about the interior like dice in a cup. There was a sudden jolt as if the ship had abruptly slammed into something hard.

Either the thing had accidentally struck a sensitive portion of itself with part of the unyielding craft or else it was generally infuriated by its inability to crack the hide of this strange prey, because it had thrown them end over end to bang to a stop against an inoffensive wave.

The shuttle automatically rolled to an upright position. Kirk then pulled himself to his feet, saw they were still seaworthy and watertight.

"Spock ... Bones ... Lieutenant Clayton?"

Replies came back promptly. "Surprisingly sound, Captain." "I'm all right, Jim." "Okay, I think, sir."

He stumbled to the dome, holding one hand to the large red bruise forming on his left cheek. "What was it, anyway?"

"At the moment my scientific curiosity stands in abeyance, Jim," McCoy groaned. "Just so long as it doesn't come back..." He struggled to his feet.

Kirk took a quick step back from the dome. "No such luck, Bones. Clayton..."

Before Kirk could say anything else, the upper portion of the Argoan life-form erupted from the water hard by the shuttle. From what they could see, it resembled a cross between an oversized snake and a whale, with the addition of four side-tentacles thick enough to embarrass Earth's grandfather squid. That they were fully functional had already been amply demonstrated.

It was Spock, not the more severely stunned Clayton, who slipped into the pilot's seat and edged them around in the water. He was taking action even as Kirk ordered it.

"Firing phasers on stun, Captain."

Two poles of fiery red light bolted from the nose of the shuttle, enveloped the head of the monster in a glowing nimbus. The concentrated light danced on amber and copper colored scales.

Incredibly, the creature continued toward the shuttle for another couple of seconds. Then its continual roaring faded to an echo. Still moving weakly, reflexively, it sank from sight beneath the waves.

Uncaring swells dusted the place clean, left nothing to indicate the apparition which had loomed there moments before. Spock paused at the console a moment longer to

make certain it was no ruse on the part of the monster, then moved to aid Clayton.

"It's all right, Mr. Spock." The younger officer was limping slightly. "I twisted an ankle a little, that's all. I'll be okay."

Spock nodded once, then walked to the dome to stare at the spot where the creature had disappeared. Clayton returned to his position at the front console, sitting down carefully.

"What the devil was that thing?" McCoy murmured.

As usual, the doctor gave in to his oft-times infuriating affectation for redundancy, Spock mused - and as usual, he held the easy retort in check.

"Clearly one of the multitude of life-forms which the drone survey neglected to record."

"Hard to see how something that big could be overlooked," Kirk mused. "Still, with such a large area to cover in so short a time, I'm not surprised. The presence of a predator that size is a sure sign of a thriving ecology. I don't think I've ever seen anything quite like this one."

"A rough combination of Terran Cetacea and Cephalopoda, with unique characteristics of its own," Spock added.

Kirk appeared to reach a decision.

"Let's get another look at it before the stun wears off," he announced. "That was a pretty strong jolt it absorbed ... we should be safe."

He glanced back over his shoulder.

"Submerge, Lieutenant. Keep the currents here in mind."

"Aye, sir, submerging..."

II

Clayton maneuvered the streamlined craft with ever greater skill. After several minutes of searching they had found no sign of the monster. But the view about the dome made up for it.

They had sunk into a green mist tinged with the ever-present amber and were now making their way through a world of green glass. The bottom here was close enough to the surface so that sunlight penetrated all the way to the sand.

If the world above with its monotonous, unvarying seascape and its looming island appeared simple and unchanging, the bottom presented a gaudy contrast.

Exotic marine flora abounded, formed a kaleidoscopic background for the alien zoo that lived in and about it. The slanting sunlight combined with an Argoal coral-analog to enhance the similarity to an Earthly topical lagoon.

Some of the ichthyoids wore broad, feathery tails that would have been more at home on a peacock than on a swimmer. And the moss which so strikingly decorated the island peaks grew even more abundantly below the surface.

Here and there schools of thousands of minute crimson fish darted in and about the densest mosses, so thick in places that the water appeared to be on fire. They reflected metallically off the polished, backs of lumbering, clownish molluscs which scoured the nooks and crannies in the coral like old women at a rummage sale.

"There it is," McCoy exclaimed, even as Clayton was turning the shuttle in the direction of the somnolent sea monster. The creature had drifted slightly south of where it had gone down. Now it rested immobile on the amber sand.

"Look out," Kirk observed. "Try and set us down close by the head, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

As the smooth metal hull settled gently into the soft bottom there was a slight grinding noise. Moss and hypnotically swaying ferns genuflected in opposite directions, while a small colony of crustaceans protested this unannounced eviction from their apartment rock with considerable verve.

Spock and McCoy adjusted their tricorders, began to take basic readings. McCoy found something which stimulated the first scientific controversy of this exploration.

"Dual respiratory system," the doctor observed. "Lungs *and* gills."

"Most odd," Spock agreed. "Unless our assumptions are correct. If land subsidence and emergence here *is* cyclic, then it would be natural for the animal population to stand ready to live in either environment.

"However, one specimen cannot be considered representative of every species on the planet. More readings of other types are essential."

"There's that amber moss, too," McCoy pointed out "It seems to grow just as well above water as below."

The stunned monster chose that moment of temporary disinterest on the part of its bipedal observers to stir slightly. Its tentacles quivered, disturbing the sand. Abruptly, the gigantic tail jerked spasmodically.

The glancing blow was powerful enough to send the shuttle tumbling across the sea bottom, to come to a stop against a

sand hill. Amber rain fell on the plexalloy dome as the displaced sand settled back toward the bottom.

A groggy Kirk decided that this particular specimen reacted a mite too unpredictably for casual study. A second stun burst as strong as the first might kill it, anything less prove ineffectual.

As Kirk stared out the dome, the monster momentarily seemed to have developed eight tentacles instead of four. And two heads. Also, there were two Spocks and two McCoys pulling themselves to their feet.

However many limbs the creature possessed, at the moment all of them were moving in furious motion as it fought to regain its internal balance.

"Take us up, Lieutenant, it's coming around, and I think we'd better be elsewhere when it does." Clayton nodded.

The shuttle angled upward, rose from the sand and started toward the island. Kirk had one final glimpse of the beast, still thrashing about aimlessly, before the angle of ascent cut off his view.

Any normal creature, having received such a pounding, would have escaped as its first thought. This inhabitant of Argo, however, was used to running from nothing, except perhaps a larger one of its own kind. Its flailing quelled for a moment ... then the creature rolled over with a weird whistling roar and shot off with incredible speed in pursuit of the rising shuttle.

Melting greenness gave way to blue sky and a view of the island dead ahead. Expecting to see nothing but calm water, Kirk looked out the rear of the dome. And as expected, the surface rolled on unbroken - until the father of geysers erupted almost on top of them, the burst sending the nose of the shuttle slamming forward and down. It bobbed up like a cork.

Kirk had had enough of maintaining concern for nonsapient alien life-forms. "Prepare to fire phasers..."

Spock moved to the console, adjusted the proper controls, leaving Clayton free to steer the craft. He snapped a hurried look at Kirk when a certain critical light failed to wink on as expected.

"Phasers do not respond, Captain. Obviously we have sustained some damage from being struck below."

Relief or no relief, he still should have ordered a check as a matter of course, Kirk cursed. Too late for recriminations. He looked back again, hoping that the monster had perhaps lost interest or gained satisfaction.

Instead, he saw that the hunter had moved off, turned, and was now rushing back at them, mouth agape and wide as the corridor of an underground transportation system.

"Lift off, Mr. Clayton, *now!"*

The lieutenant worked the proper instruments, paused as if shot, ran through the sequence again twice as fast before throwing Kirk an anguished look.

"No response, sir! Propulsion units have been cracked ... I'm not registering a thing."

That cavern of a gullet was drawing closer and closer. Stalactites and stalagmites of polished amber ivory lined its roof and floor.

Kirk didn't waste time on shuttle communications. If both phasers and lift engine were out, chances were bad for the more delicate beam transmitter to have survived. He used his pocket communicator.

"Kirk to *Enterprise* - red alert!"

Engineer Scott's voice reflected the urgency in Kirk's own.

"*Enterprise*, Scott speaking - what is it, Captain?"

"We're under attack, Scotty, emergency - beam us aboard." His last words were drowned in the thunderous bellow which

erupted from the monster's throat.

"Full ahead, Mr. Clayton...!" The lieutenant hit controls, but not fast enough; the great tentacled head rose up, up, blotting out sun and sky - then came down. Kirk barely had time to grab for a hold before the gargantuan skull slammed into the shuttle.

Another deafening howl penetrated the dome and it grew dark as two huge jaws closed on the aft section of the tiny vessel.

Despite various grips, the impact sent everyone sprawling. Part of the upper jaw came down on the plexalloy dome. The transparent molding was incredibly strong, but its designers had never meant it to take this kind of pressure. It finally cracked.

Shaking the shuttle like an infuriated mastiff with a piece of meat, the monster banged it against a rocky protrusion lying just under the surface. That finished the remainder of the dome. Another shake sent shards of dome, torn internal components, and McCoy and Clayton flying.

The interior was a shambles. High-impact seats were twisted like licorice sticks. Spock lay jammed between the pilot's chair and the base of the control console, and Kirk was entangled in the remnants of some restraining straps.

Both men were unconscious, their limp forms bent and loose. But they didn't come free as the creature swam off, still battering at its stubborn prey.

"We've lost contact, Captain," a tinny voice yelled from somewhere within a maze of twisted metal. "We've lost contact. Come in, Captain, come in! Spock...!"

McCoy let out a whoosh as he broke the surface, looked around fearfully. But the only struggling form he saw was weak and small. He gave Clayton some support, helped him clear the water from his lungs.

Together they stared at the distant but still visible form of the monster, the cylindrical shape of the shuttle still clutched tightly in its tentacles ... what was left of it. Even as they watched, the creature rolled over on its back and vanished beneath the waves.

McCoy tried to shout, call, but couldn't manage the breath. Once more the water was calmed, once more the distant island the only projection above the gentle swells. The shuttle, the monster ... Kirk and Spock ... all gone.

Hopefully they had been thrown free, probably in the other direction. As he and Clayton had been - oh, hopefully!

As McCoy was about to suggest they start searching, a not-so-alien mist distorted his vision and he experienced a brief sensation of falling.

Once the feeling had passed, he found himself standing in the main transporter chamber of the *Enterprise*, staring at the distant forms of Scott and Transporter Chief Kyle across the room. There was the sound of flesh meeting plastic alongside him, and he turned to help the fallen Clayton. Scott was there in a second to assist him.

"What happened, Bones?" But before McCoy could form a reply the chief had turned and was calling back to Kyle, "Call Sick Bay, have them get a team up here double-time!" He gazed back into the transporter alcove.

"The captain, and Mr. Spock..." His voice faded as he saw the look on McCoy's face.

"I didn't know ... for certain, Scotty. We were taking readings on the local version of a sea serpent and ... we got a little careless. It's reaction-recovery time ... phenomenal..." A hand ran through hair matted with amber salts. He was aware he probably sounded as tired as Clayton looked.

"It attacked instinctively - wrong bedamned instinct! Threw the shuttle around like a toy. A previous attack had rendered the phasers and lift engine inoperable, but we didn't find that out until too late. I don't know if we could have outrun it on

the surface anyway. That thing was *fast*." He took a few steps, found out how tired he really was and sat down at the edge of the alcove.

"I don't know what's happened to the captain or Spock. I hope they got thrown free like Clayton and myself."

"I'll get a search party together immediately," Scott announced. McCoy was too exhausted to do more than nod.

***

Planetary ocean stretched unbroken to infinity. Only an occasional curl of foam turning in on itself broke the translucent evenness.

That, and a small slim boat of silver. A small slim boat which had been plying the surface of Argo for some time now, plying zig-zag and spiral routes across computer-suggested courses.

The narrow silhouette was broken only by a pair of compact powerpacks attached to its stern ... and three irregular shapes seated within.

McCoy and Clayton stood in the bow, patiently scanning the horizon with telescopic binoculars. The doctor paused to rub his tired eyes, something he was doing with increasing frequency.

He stopped, stared at the dappled surface without the aid of the mounted telefocals. "Five days and we've found nothing. *Nothing*."

"They can't just have dropped out of sight, sir," said a sanguine Clayton. McCoy turned to eye him sadly, shook his head.

"Currents, scavengers, a little shift in the lie of the bottom..." He shrugged. "They're gone, that's all there is to it."

Clayton said nothing and both men turned their gaze back to the telefocals. It was the lieutenant's turn next to break the silence.

"I see something, anyway. Barely above sea level, bearing thirty, forty degrees to starboard, about three kilometers off, I'd say." He fiddled with the fine adjustment on the precision focals as McCoy turned his own glasses in the indicated direction. Clayton's voice rose.

"There's something on them catching the sun - and I don't think it's rocks!"

All the exhaustion had gone from McCoy's eyes now. His gaze was surgeon sharp. Scott had moved to stare through his own set, rest turn or no.

A dark mass of cracked, tumbled boulders, worn smooth by the constant wave action. The highest point on the low-lying island rose barely two or three meters from the water. McCoy pressed the telescopic switch, and the image jumped nearer.

Details revealed odd-shaped fragments of reflective material ... bits of the hull and cabin section of the lost shuttle, for sure. They lay displayed on the rocks like ornaments on a tree.

McCoy lurched slightly as the boat shifted, lost his gaze. Scott was swinging the prow around. He gunned the twin power-packs and they jetted toward the rocks.

"Any sign of them, Bones?" the chief engineer shouted as he nosed the gig into a notch between two protruding rocks. McCoy shook his head. Clayton scrambled out with a rope in one hand, secured it around a projecting knob of worn obsidian that looked solid enough to anchor the *Enterprise* itself. Clearly, this island had not appeared within the last couple of days.

McCoy climbed out of the gig. Ignoring the debris strewn around his feet, he started for the peak of the little islet, picking his path carefully around sharp edges of metal, plastic and volcanic glass.

No doubt about it, though, the bulk of the shuttle had been washed up - or tossed up - here. He topped the gentle rise and looked down the other side.

That's when he spotted Kirk and Spock.

On the other side of the islet the water was barely a meter deep, washing up over amber-white sand into a miniature bay. The motionless forms of the *Enterprise*'s captain and first officer lay face down in the sand.

"They're here!" he yelled back. "Hurry!"

Seconds later Clayton and Scott were splashing through the water, dragging in panic at the two bodies.

"You think they're still alive, Bones?" Scott didn't look at his friend as he said it.

McCoy's reply was grim, honest. "Not if they've been down there for five days."

Both forms seemed to weigh tons. They fought to move Kirk to the nearest dry land while keeping his head above water.

"They might have swum here, crawled ashore dazed, and just fallen into the water recently from weakness," McCoy said wishfully. "*Very* recently, I hope."

They finally managed to drag Kirk's waterlogged form onto a flat section of island. Leaving his feet dangling in the water, they went back for Spock.

As soon as both men were lying alongside one another, McCoy reached into his backpack and removed the medical tricorder. Adjusting it quickly, he passed it over Kirk's chest, then reset it and did the same with Spock. Then he made additional adjustments and repeated the action, including head and neck this time.

While Scott and Clayton looked on anxiously, McCoy studied the resultant readouts. Without a word, he ran through the entire sequence again, finally sat back and frowned at the instrument as though it had suddenly grown arms and legs.

"For the sake of Reaction, say somethin'!" Scott eventually exploded. "Are they alive?"

McCoy blinked, appeared to come out of a dream. He looked at Spock without seeing him - then ran through the examination yet another time.

"Their life systems are still functioning," he finally said, as Scott was about to scream. "Metabolism is slowed, heartbeat slightly faster, all other bodily functions altered - but within acceptable parameters." He looked up in confusion.

"I say 'acceptable' because they're incontrovertably alive. But there's something about their lungs and the rest of their respiratory systems I can't figure at all." He shook the tricorder. "Not with this toy, anyway."

Clayton interrupted, gestured at the bodies. "They're coming around."

Kirk's eyes opened first ... opened, and opened, until they stared skyward in shock and fear. He grabbed at his throat, and his words came out in a feathery, agonized whisper as he twisted on the damp stone.

"Can't ... breathe. Suffocating...!"

"No ... air ... choking ... odd..." Spock said huskily, like a dying asthmatic.

All three officers stared at their two comrades in horror: helpless, confused, uncertain. Spock's hands went to his chest in a reflexive spasm, Kirk's shifting between chest and throat. Both men began tearing at their shirts, the actions of someone fighting to clear some invisible constriction from his lungs.

That was when McCoy first noticed the fine membrane stretched between their fingers. It looked organic, not artificial - almost like webbing, in fact. And that slight, silvery-amber flaking on the backs of Kirk's hands ... why, it was as if the captain had grown scales!

"Help...!" Kirk whispered hoarsely, "Can't ... breathe..."

"What's happening to them, Bones?" Scott pleaded. "What's goin' on?"

"Something's changed their whole respiratory structure," McCoy whispered in awe. "They can't live in the atmosphere anymore. Not a gaseous one, anyway." He stood, grabbed Kirk's arms. "Get his ankles! Help me get them back in the water!"

They had an easier time wrestling the two men back into the shallow pool than they had had pulling them out. As soon as their faces passed beneath the clear surface, both men ceased struggling. Instead of grabbing at their chests, they relaxed completely.

McCoy stared in disbelief, even though he half expected what would happen, as Kirk rolled over on the sand and stared up at him through the crystal-clear surface. As to which officer was the more shocked, no one could say.

Scott walked over to stand next to him, likewise gazing down at his two good friends in horrified fascination.

"What do we do now, Doctor?" McCoy hesitated, then turned to the chief engineer and spoke with conviction.

"We get the captain and Mr. Spock on board, Scotty." And he went on to outline what had to be done.

***

The corridor was empty except for McCoy. The security chambers in Sick Bay were used (infrequently, at that) for the care and treatment of criminals or dangerous aliens. Now one of them had been converted to a much different - and more vital - use. McCoy would encounter no one as he spoke into the recording pickup.

"Medical log, Stardate 5527.1 Captain Kirk and First Officer Spock were rescued - with qualifications - forty-eight hours ago."

He turned the last corner into the recently empty chamber. In place of the double-security door just inside the entrance, a rather different restraining wall had been installed. It consisted of a plate of clear plexalloy, backed by an air space, and then another plexalloy plate. Beyond this airtight seal the chamber was filled four-fifths full with water - a special kind of water, at that.

McCoy was taking no chances with substitutions from the *Enterprise*'s own tanks. The water which filled the room had been transported up in containers from the Argoan world-ocean - from the inlet where Kirk and Spock had been found. The amber sand that covered the floor of the room came from the same location. McCoy's only liberty had been with the air supply: he had to substitute a pump for the natural plant oxygenation system below. So far, neither officer had demonstrated any ill effects from this one concession to convenience.

Kirk and Spock were at the far end of the room, moving aimlessly, dispiritedly over the bottom sand. They were deep enough in thought, undoubtedly musing on their present situation, so that they failed to notice the doctor's entrance. McCoy studied them, resumed speaking into the pickup.

"They have no recollection of what happened after they were thrown from the shuttle. Medical analysis has revealed the presence of an unknown and as yet unidentified substance in their bloodstreams. There is a high probability that this substance is responsible for the alteration of their metabolism and for changing them into water-breathers."

He stopped, shut the recorder off. Both men had noticed his arrival and were moving toward the transparent wall. As they approached, McCoy once again marveled at the process which had somehow altered his friends' internal structure so efficiently.

Even their eyes had been affected. They were now covered with a transparent film like the second eyelids of some lizards. And of course there were the primary manifestations of the change such as the pronounced scaling and toughening of the

skin, increased layers of subcutaneous fatty tissue, and webbing of fingers and toes.

While the two officers stared at him mutely, he moved to a panel set in the wall, examined the gauges and meters it proffered.

Temperature, pressure, salinity, oxygen content ... everything read normal ... for a fish. He nodded to the watching Kirk and Spock. Kirk acknowledged with a single jerk of his head and McCoy touched a switch in the bottom of the panel.

A metal section in the nontransparent portion of the wall slid aside. McCoy entered the pressure cubicle and touched another switch, closing the door behind him. A nudge on the belt at his waist, and the glow of a life-support system enveloped his form in soft yellow radiance.

At the adjustment of a simple lever set inside the cubicle, water began to creep up around his feet, ankles, knees. When the chamber was completely filled, McCoy slid the interior door aside and walked clumsily into the water room.

Kirk and Spock were waiting for him. As usual, their voices held a slight fuzziness, like a beam transmission coming in unamplified from across too many light-years. That they sounded even halfway normal was in itself remarkable, but whatever had touched them had been thorough ... their vocal cords had been altered for speaking under water.

"Well, Bones?" was all Kirk said.

"We're stumped, Jim. Nothing's worked. We've pretty much settled on this new hormone in your blood as the root cause of the entire mutation. Antidote doesn't automatically follow identification, however. There are some of the weirdest-looking molecules involved you ever saw, and they go on forever. So far the situation defies analysis."

Kirk just nodded - there wasn't much else he could do. "What about the other thing ... are you sure the alteration wasn't performed naturally?"

McCoy shook his head. "No, Jim. Someone's been working on the both of you. I'm certain of that. There are too many signs of penetration at key structural points - you had to receive the hormone artificially."

Kirk let out a bitter, bubbling laugh. "Bang goes the theory of there being no intelligent life on Argo." He paused, thoughtfully. "The medical computers have the entire medicinal knowledge of the Federation in their archives. Can't you duplicate the procedure on a lab animal, then work backwards to find the antidote?"

McCoy didn't mention the nagging fear that the mutation might be irreversible. "Sorry, Jim. The surgico-chemical methodology here is utterly alien to us - to me, anyhow. Highly sophisticated, too. If I knew how to begin to approach the procedure, I might..." His voice trailed off.

"So we are left with locating a previously unknown, unsuspected sapient life-form below," Spock put in. "Evidently the initial surveys saw nothing but simple marine forms." McCoy looked hesitant

"I don't see how even a dumb drone could miss a race capable of this kind of medical technology."

"Medical technology is not highly visible," Spock countered. "Knowledge of that sort does not imply knowledge of, for example, advanced structural engineering or other highly visible signs of civilization. Many primitive cultures possess basic, yet complex medical abilities."

"You're reaching, Spock," said McCoy.

"It is only one of several possible explanations," the first officer readily admitted. "Another lies in the composition of the Argoan sea itself. The presence of large amounts of dissolved metals and mineral salts could easily distort delicate sensor readings, block others entirely. Also, such sensors were probably set for shallow scans, ignoring possibly inhabited depths."

McCoy smiled.

"All very plausible, Spock. But if true, where does that leave us? We can't carry out efficient underwater exploration without the aqua-shuttle, and that was our only vehicle designed for liquid-environment study." He gestured at the belt circling his waist.

"We can exist underwater with life-support belts, but out time is limited and our mobility even more so. Also, if there's somebody down there who wants to stay hidden, it would be pretty damn difficult to hide a bunch of floating yellow light bulbs."

"Well, we aren't limited!" Kirk blurted in frustration. "Spock and I go anywhere in that ocean as efficiently as the natives." He smiled grimly. "We've been designed to do so."

McCoy's face took on a look of alarm. "Too risky, Jim. Argo is totally unexplored. If sensors couldn't penetrate that metalized soup you want to go swimming about in, chances are communications won't be much good, either. And if there are any more minnows down there like the one that hit the shuttle..."

Kirk's smile widened, but the grimness remained in his voice. "We don't have a choice, Bones." He waved a webbed hand. "I can't command a ship from in here ... hell, I can't even *live* in here! We'd go crazy in a week!"

"The captain somewhat exaggerates the subjective time involved," Spock corrected evenly, "but the inevitability of his prediction is one I'm not prepared to argue with."

"I know how you feel, Jim, Spock," said McCoy. "But there's still a chance we might find a solution in the lab. If you go down into that ocean, out of contact..." Kirk cut him off.

"Right now the percentages give us two choices, Bones. Live in an aquarium for the rest of our lives like curiosities, freaks - or stay on Argo as her first Federation settlers. I refuse to accept either one of them."

McCoy shifted his attention from the stubborn set of Kirk's face to appeal to Spock.

"What about you, Spock? You can view this in a logical, dispassionate manner."

"The captain states the case emotionally, of course," Spock replied instantly, "but correctly." McCoy's expression fell. "I would be of very little value to this ship - or to myself - if I were to remain confined to a tank in Sick Bay." He paused, added, "In a way, we are total invalids, Doctor. Something you should be able to understand. We must seek any possible treatment, no matter what the corollary dangers."

Kirk raised his right hand, studied the webbing. "Any intelligence that can produce this kind of mutation ought to be able to change us back. *Has* to change us back." He lowered the hand and stared unwaveringly at McCoy.

"There are some other physicians in this vicinity, Bones, and we've *got* to find them..."

III

The sun of Argo, slightly yellower than Sol, glinted sharply off mirrorlike swells, struck the small silver splinter excitedly and raced on to illumine the island.

Kirk, Spock, Scott and Clayton filled the gig, the latter two holding phasers as they surveyed the surrounding surface for signs of anything even faintly inimical. The tiny boat bobbed just outside the long morning shadows cast by the towering island.

Kirk and Spock made final adjustments of the dark green vinyl that clung to their bodies like a second skin. Bubbles burst occasionally inside the awkward, water-filled masks they wore. Spock moved to the side of the gig while Kirk turned to face his chief engineer. His words came through the mask barely comprehensible.

"We'll make contact as soon as possible, Mr. Scott."

"Aye, sir," Scott replied uneasily. He felt no better about this than had McCoy.

Kirk moved to the side of the gig, looked at his first officer. Spock nodded once. Both men took a deep breath, the water level falling visibly within their faceplates. Then they hurriedly removed both masks and attendant tanks, dropped them into the boat, and dove over the side.

Scott moved to the side, looked down at both men floating comfortably just under the surface. Kirk looked up at him, waved once, and turned to swim downward. The water was clear and Scott continued staring for a long time, until both men had finally disappeared from view...

There are three habitable zones to most life-giving worlds: the air, the land and, lastly, the sea. And those who have claimed

either of the first two have clearly not deigned to get their feet wet.

It's not merely the incredible lushness that mesmerizes those who plow beneath the surface, nor is it the overwhelming abundance of life that comprises such lushness. To most, it's the constant motion that contrasts so heavily with the stilted, jointed world of air-breathers. Everything underwater is part of a single, unending ballet - a dancing ecology, where every inhabitant from the lowliest worm or plant to the bemuscled and fanged carnivore knows its assigned steps and performs uncomplainingly a perpetual choreography.

Such was the world of green glass through which Kirk and Spock now probed a leisurely path. Descending gradually, they leveled off about a dozen meters from the sandy bottom, began to swim outward from the island. Clusters of amber moss sequined with phosphorescent shells and tiny crawling things drifted lazily in the gentle current. Tight formations of brilliantly hued little fish wheeled and spun in Prussian cloudlets, while larger solitary swimmers observed enviously.

The two bipeds began to move in a widening spiral, now well out from the lonely gig bobbing far above and behind them. Finally, on the fourth curve out, Kirk and Spock encountered what looked very much like a cultivated area. The garden was laid out in an unearthly but undeniably artificial fashion. Instead of distinct rows of different plants, all grew together, but neatly spaced among themselves. There was no crowding, no competition for light or sandy soil among the green, pink and amber vegetation.

Climbing over low sand dunes, the garden appeared to thicken in the distance. A few kicks brought Kirk and Spock to the outlying growths. Wordless, they examined the unmistakable signs of hand planting, constant weeding and care. Spock pointed and without a word they swam to the top of the first dune. They gently nudged through the dense vegetation crowning its top and studied the view beyond.

The garden, farm, or whatever it was stretched out impressively, occupying the sandy plain in all directions for a

considerable distance. Far more commanding, however, were the shapes that swam slowly and purposefully among the intricate patterns.

They were humanoid and had almost human fore-limbs. But the rear limbs bore no resemblance to anything mankind had ever possessed. The legs appeared almost boneless, while the feet were true flippers, supple and flexible. A small dorsal fin set just back of the neck between the shoulder blades added to the alien aspect. The skin was a variant of the omnipresent amber, with shades of gold or green, while strands of vestigial hair the color of silver and gold tinsel topped the skull.

The race was obviously mammalian, women mixing in about equal numbers with men in the garden. Both sexes were clad in close-fitting garments of minute, metallically colored shells arranged in a multitude of individual designs.

"Once again, the basic humanoid model dominates," Spock murmured softly, "fully adapted for oceanic survival."

"Even so, Spock, they still seem to retain some above-water movements. Maybe instinctive, maybe habitual ... I don't know. Here's another sign of the rapid subsidence of land hereabouts." He paused. "And I think we've been noticed."

Sure enough, several heads had turned to stare in their direction. Some of the figures were moving hastily backward, giving signs of alarm.

"I cannot vouch for their other senses," Spock commented appraisingly, "but their hearing is evidently acute."

"Well, we came to find them," Kirk sighed. He kicked with both legs, moving through the soft growth and down the slope. Spock followed.

At this first hint of movement, several more of the Argoans moved away, while others stood their ground and brandished tools which were none the less lethal-looking for all their agricultural design. One of the natives drifted slightly in front of his companions, then mouthed something momentarily incomprehensible at Kirk and Spock. Apparently the linguistic

pattern was relatively standard. The tiny universal translators strapped beneath the green bodysuits hummed softly and the message came out in their ear speakers as, "Go away, air-breathers. You are not wanted here."

Kirk had hoped for a friendly greeting at best, a curious one at the least. But this expression of familiarity combined with hostility had taken him aback.

Keeping his gaze on the speaker, he directed his voice toward the pickup set in the concealed translator. It rescrambled his voice into something the sea-dwellers could comprehend.

"We won't harm you ... we are friends. We seek only friendship ... and knowledge."

"Leave us!" a woman shouted from the crowd. "It is enough for our young to have saved your lives once. If you go on, nothing will save you again." She turned, swam with powerful strokes over the next dune.

Others turned, started to follow. "Wait, listen," Kirk implored those departing, "we only..."

"Go away!" the man at the head of the mob shouted. He lingered longer than the others; but eventually he, too, turned and swam furiously to catch up.

A mystified Kirk and Spock found themselves floating alone in the field.

"It doesn't make any sense, Spock. They said that they saved us once; and so they have, but why...?"

"Excuse me, Captain," Spock cut in, "but I believe their exact phrasing was, 'our young saved your lives once.'" That gave Kirk pause.

"Yes, that's right - and these adults didn't seem to approve." He stared in the direction taken by the vanished Argoans. "The answers appear to be that way, Mr. Spock."

As they swam after the retreating farmers, Spock mused, "They are not particularly rational," he observed in a mildly reproving tone, "or at least one of them would surely have realized that we were badly outnumbered as well as apparently weaponless.

"Yet even so, they were frightened. Their primitive fear of air-breathers and this," he gestured around them, "evidence of simple hand farming hardly indicate a race capable of highly advanced surgical procedures. A curious dichotomy here, Captain. Our observations will not readily supply a solution."

"Then we'll just have to press a little harder, Spock. Eventually something's going to have to give. With answers, I hope." They swam on in silence.

Several minutes of steady swimming brought them to the base of a coral-studded reef which rose to the surface. Kirk treaded water easily as they studied the sweeping escarpment. It swept off unbroken to left and right.

"Surely they didn't go over the top of this, Spock."

"Possible but not likely, Captain, I agree. I suggest we separate and study potential approaches, staying within sight of one another."

"All right." Kirk swam off to the left, Spock went the other way. Soon thereafter, he turned at a feathery yell from his first officer.

"Here, Captain...!"

A moment later he drifted alongside Spock, where the latter floated by a crevice in the undersea palisade - a fathomless, gaping wound that penetrated the reef for an unknown distance.

"Excellent place for an ambush," he muttered

"True, Captain. Yet why arrange so elaborate a deception? They could easily have overpowered us earlier. I submit they

went through here ... without stopping." He nodded toward the horizontal shaft.

Both men worked at their suit belts, produced thin, sealed cylinders - powerful undersea lights. Kirk activated his, turned to throw a tubular beam of brightness into the crack. He moved it around, and the beam revealed nothing but naked rock, dead coral, and a few stunted plants and some terrified dwellers in darkness, who quickly darted out of sight into private abysses of their own.

Keeping both beams fairly parallel, they entered the trench.

It was longer than Kirk expected. In places it became almost a tunnel, as the walls arched overhead to blot out all hints of the surface.

He forced himself to concentrate on the finite cone of rock illumined by the light. This was a place for observation, not imagination, to hold sway.

Something touched him on the shoulder and he jerked sharply, but relaxed when he found it was only Spock's hand. The first officer extinguished his light, motioned for Kirk to do the same. They waited silently while their eyes readjusted to the absence of light. Or was it absent?

For several moments while they floated in dark coolness, he saw nothing. Then he became aware that he could make out the faint outlines of the trench around them, albeit dimly.

The illumination appeared to emanate from somewhere close ahead. A few kicks brought them into increased light from overhead once again. Eventually they reached the end of the trench.

Here the coral rampart dropped off in a steep cliff to a broad sandy plain deeper and wider than the one they'd just left. What rose lofty and ethereal there made the manicured gardens and jeweled schools of fish they'd seen pale to insignificance.

What they had come upon was an underwater city, constructed with complete disregard for any ancient cataclysm, any present currents, any concern of any sort save aesthetics ... a metropolis of faery.

Thin winding towers emulated the internal configuration of spiral seashells in grace and strength. Another huge, shell-shaped structure dominated the city, rising in its center. It was as if the city had been poured whole, entire, from a single, carefully sculpted mold, instead of being built by piece and bit.

At the point nearest the base of the coral cliff, a large archway formed a prominent break in the wall that surrounded the city. Variously clad inhabitants were swimming in and out in a steady two-way stream, intent on unknown aspects of Argoan commerce.

"Beautiful ... and fascinating," Spock commented. "Notice the wall and use of the archway, when both are easily avoidable. Both carry-overs from land-dwelling times."

"All the more reason to wonder, Spock," said Kirk, shaking his head in puzzlement. "A civilization capable of building something like this, able to withstand continental subsiding, capable of medical accomplishments unheard of in the Federation - why should they be afraid of us, Spock?"

"Perhaps the proper term would be abhorrence, Captain, not fear. It is quite possible they find us grotesque and ugly. Basis enough for their reactions thus far. There is ample precedent in Earth's history."

Kirk nodded slowly. "Agreed. Still, we've got to get inside, no matter what they think of our features. There seems to be much less activity on the far side." Spock strained his gaze.

"I also feel no cultural inhibitions about ignoring the archway, Captain."

Dodging occasional solitary Argoans and taking care to remain a good distance from the city proper, the two men began to

swim in a broad curve away from what they'd determined to be the city's main entrance.

Eventually they approached a section of wall that looked deserted. Even so, they felt conspicuous against the bright white and amber sand bottom. They waited until the lowing sun fonned a dark shadow behind one thick tower, then swam for it.

A quick survey revealed they were in a little frequented section of the city. Kirk motioned and they swam slowly toward its center. He had no definite plan in mind - there was nothing to formulate one on - only that they had to contact the physician-scientists who had instigated the initial mutation. Persuasion would hopefully follow.

They made rapid progress, keeping close to the walls of low-lying structures wherever feasible. Once they almost kicked head-on into a crowd of busy Argoans as they stumbled into a central crossway. They had to dart back into a nook between buildings and wait for the aliens to pass.

"There it is," Kirk finally whispered.

They were floating on the opposite side of a broad, open plaza from the huge shell-shaped central structure. Right now it was devoid of strollers, and both officers wondered at the absence of citizens.

"Perhaps everyone is out in the fields at this time," Spock speculated, "or deep within the structures engaged in daily tasks we cannot conceive of. Or it may be that..."

Words and actions were cut off abruptly as a large weighted net dropped neatly over them. Two males appeared on either side and above them, crossed in a deadly precision maneuver beneath the two startled officers and pulled the net tight.

Kirk and Spock found themselves unable to get a purchase on anything solid, unable to get any speed in the folds of the net, and unable to break it. All the while they were discovering these depressing facts, their captors were towing them

efficiently toward the very domed edifice they'd sought to reach.

Kirk finally stopped fighting the netting and relaxed. They might need their strength later and have a better chance to use it. He also tried to look on the bright side of things.

They had wanted to enter the shell-shaped building - very well, it seemed they were going to do that. Not as stealthily as he had planned, perhaps, but half an apple was better than none.

They entered through a broad, low, open arch much like the anachronistic city gate, were towed through several twisting, winding halls. Inside, at least, the Argoans had managed to shuck off enough of their land-based memory to build without regard to land-based gravity.

Some of the hallways dipped up in curves, others ran down to undisclosed depths at crazy angles. Eventually they emerged into a huge auditorium near the roof of the building. As they did so Kirk realized why they had seen so few Argoans swimming over the rooftops.

Most of the buildings were doubtless arranged like this one, with transparent or translucent roofs to let in the light of day. Mass movement overhead would not only be disconcerting, it would block the light as well as eliminate privacy.

Kirk then turned his attention to more immediate matters. The chamber walls were decorated with huge globes of a creamy, pearl-like luster. Here was a raised dais at the far end of the chamber. Its three carved seats were occupied by male Argoans.

It was difficult to judge age with any accuracy. But judging from their attitude and bearing as much as outward appearance, Kirk felt these three were fully mature specimens. One was slim and appeared to be regarding them with a thoughtful, though amused air. The one on the far right was slightly paunchy, and his expression was less readable. Between them, the tallest of the triumvirate studied Kirk with piercing amber eyes that seemed to cut right through him. A

remarkable personality, Kirk decided instantly, and the one to be watched most carefully.

There was a lower dais set to the left, again with three seats. Two of its occupants were males, the third female - attractive in a fishy sort of way. They were generally little smaller than the other three. But their motions were quicker, their eyes moved faster, and Kirk had the definite impression that they were considerably younger than those sitting on the main platform.

Time for analysis vanished as Kirk found himself tumbling head over heels toward the dais, net and all. He thrashed about, trying to regain his balance in the enclosed space.

"Here are the spies, Tribune," the translator reported in his ear - the words of one of their captors. There was an unmistakable hint of disgust in his final words: "Air-breathers!"

The tall one, the one with the eyes, rose from the dais to hover in the water before them. He studied Kirk and Spock coldly, and the translator managed to convey some of that coldness across unemotional circuitry.

"You stand."

"Inaccurate," mumbled Spock, struggling to turn erect within the clinging coils of the net.

"I am Domar," their questioner began, "the High Tribune of the..."

"Aquans" was the nearest the translator could come to interpreting the unpronouncable name these folk had for themselves.

"These are my advisors, Cadmar and Cheron," the imposing speaker continued, indicating the beings to his right and left.

Kirk gave up trying to extricate himself from the net, settled for striking a dignified post within. "I am Captain James Kirk of the Starship *Enterprise*. This is my first officer, Mr. Spock."

The thin brows of the High Tribune drew together uncertainly. "Your words are meaningless. You are air-breather enemies from the surface. We have been expecting you for a long time, never letting down our guard from the Old Days."

"If you find my words meaningless, I confess I find yours confusing, Tribune," Kirk admitted truthfully. "We came here in peace."

Domar's frown deepened. His two companions gazed grimly at the officers. "The ancient records," he announced, "warn that air-breathers never come in peace."

"Are you saying," broke in a new, challenging voice, "that they come in war, then ... without any weapons?"

Kirk looked sharply to his left. The young female was on her flippers, staring belligerently at the Tribune. On her right side one of the males added, "Can we do nothing without consulting the ancient records? Have we no ability to analyze and decide without the advice of the long-dead?"

Obviously this was a very different society from, say, that of Earth; for this challenge produced definite hints of hesitation in the attitudes of two of the Tribunes - Cadmar and Cheron. One minute they appeared as inflexible as the walls of the city, the next and their convictions showed cracks at the first objection from their younger colleagues. If the High Tribune Domar felt the same lack of assurance, he didn't show it.

There was an unmistakable weariness in Cheron's voice as he countered, "Why do the Junior Tribunes always wish to change the records? Are the words of those who built this city empty for them? Are they...?"

Domar put out a quieting hand, then the council leader turned and made a gesture to the two guards.

"Let the mesh be removed - but stand ready. Beware the air-breather's deceptiveness."

With considerable relief, Kirk and Spock felt the netting being removed. As they were freed, all six Tribunes inspected them

with renewed interest. The powerful amplifier in the tiny translator brought Kirk a whispered translation from - he struggled to recall the vaguely Greco-Roman sounding names. Lemas - that was the youngster's name.

"The surgeons did their jobs well," he was murmuring. "Observe the perfection of the metamorphosis and the ease with which their bodies have adapted."

Kirk felt faintly flattered - the sort of mild exhilaration one experiences when participating in the hard-won success of others. Still, the Tribune's words were not conclusive evidence. The process still might have been initiated naturally and only completed by artificial means. It would pay to be sure.

His natural inclination was to address himself immediately to the younger, seemingly friendly Tribunes. He needed his years of diplomatic experience to tell himself that their elders wouldn't look kindly on the implied slight. So he directed his first words to Domar.

"Then your scientists *did* induce these mutations in our systems?"

"We had no other moral choice. Unlike air-breathers," he finished roughly, "we do not wish to kill."

"You could simply have left us where we were and let us drown," Spock pointed out.

A twinge of contempt was added to Domains coldness.

"Indifference to the injured is merely another form of murder. A typical air-breather observation. You were brought here unconscious, barely alive. You were returned to a place near where you were found still unconscious, far more alive. Our obligation was discharged."

"It would seem that their own ancient records are as well preserved as ours," Cadmar put in. "They found us again anyway, to come among us as spies."

Again that shrill female voice cut the water. "You do not give them a chance to defend or explain themselves, Cadmar. Our law does allow that, even for unmentionable air-breathers who come among us."

"Rela is correct," said Domar, then turning back to Kirk and Spock. "You may speak ... if you have the nerve."

"Look," Kirk began, ignoring Domar's invitation to fight, "you've apparently had some pretty bad experiences in the past with the last remnants of whatever branch of your race remained on the surface of this world. I can tell you with some assurance that you've no longer anything to fear from *that* quarter!

"As for ourselves, we come from another world entirely. Our only desire in returning to your city - which we found simply by following some of your farmers - was to..."

He did not get a chance to finish. The excitement his words had generated in the younger Tribunes finally spilled over.

"You do not live on the surface places?" Rela inquired wonderingly.

"Not of this world," Spock began, "we..."

The conversation was getting too complicated for Cadmar, at least. "Enough!" he cried, the violence of his comment bringing him out of his seat. "Clearly, this is a great lie. Another world, indeed! The situation is plain. The air-breathers are come again to wreak havoc among us."

"You are mistaken, sir," Spock objected quietly. "As Captain Kirk was about to say, our only purpose in returning here was to find a means of reversing the mutations you induced in us."

"That, at least, is impossible," Domar informed them brusquely. "There is nothing in the surgical records we retain that designates a method for reverse mutation."

Kirk slumped inwardly. That was it, then. He was doomed to spend the rest of his life drifting in a portable container. A

curiosity, a freak for Federation scientists to ponder on and take periodic samples from.

Spock, undoubtedly, would handle it better than he. He wondered what it was going to be like to spend the rest of his life at the wrong end of a microscope.

***

The slight dot took on shape and form as Scott adjusted the telefocals. It resolved into a long, narrow creature with broad fins, a long thin tail, flapping wings and fishlike body. It skimmed low over the distant surface and he thought he could make out feathery gills on the back of the thing's neck.

Apparently an amphibious flier. Interesting. He wished Spock were here to see it and venture an opinion.

He wished Spock were here, period.

There was a buzz at his hip. He acknowledged the communicator call and McCoy's voice drifted up from the speaker.

"*Enterprise* to Mr. Scott."

Scott watched a moment longer as the flier folded leathery wings against its body and dove into the water. Then he turned his attention to the communicator.

"Scott here ... what is it, Doctor?"

"All departments have been proceeding with their own missions, as per Jim's orders, Scotty. We just got a bulletin from seismology. There's a major quake due in that area."

"How soon?"

"Meier can't be certain, but it's going to be a bad one. Complete topography shift."

"All right, he can't be exact ... I know those guys down there. What's their best estimate?"

A pause at the other end, and then McCoy's voice came back tense, worried. "Probably within four hours, Scotty. That's a conservative guess."

"And inside the captain and Mr. Speck's report-in time," he replied in alarm.

"Inside! Can't you contact them before that?"

"Kinna do it, Doctor. They've no communicators and..." He stopped, thought a moment. "Wait ... there ought to be a trace signal from their translators. Those gadgets are small, but they use a lot of power. We can try like blue blazes, anyway. Scott out."

He flipped off, turned to the anxiously waiting Clayton. "Let's get out those other suits and the life-support belts, Lieutenant. Contact our other boats. We're goin' fishin'."

The green body suite were the closest thing to camouflage they had. But there was no way to disguise the glow from the belts. One by one the belts were activated and the little party dropped over the side.

Scott descended rapidly, braked to study the reading on the wrist guage he had donned along with the suit and belt. He turned slowly, finally stopped facing toward deeper water.

"Directional pickup indicates they're in that general direction, toward those dunes. Let's go." The little knot of crewmen started off in the indicated direction, shining like fireflies in the clear water.

Searching eyes roved over gorgeously colored underwater life, exotically shaped, remarkably shaded. Plant or animal or both, all were resolutely ignored. The party was hunting for more simply clad, more awkwardly built swimmers.

Two pairs of eyes studied them from behind a concealing dune of amber sand and rock. One pair belonged to one of the farmers Kirk and Spock had encountered earlier.

"More air-breathers," she reported to her companion. "We must inform the Tribunes." The other nodded and they streaked away, weaving in and out among the bemmies and beds of pseudo-kelp.

***

"The name of our starship, our above-the-air vessel," Kirk explained to the intent Tribunes, "is on the wreckage of our underwater craft. If you want proof, examine the remains."

"Yes," insisted Rela, "let us examine the wreckage before we pass judgment."

"To what end?" wondered Cheron tiredly. "The fact that their vessel has a name is no proof of extra-Argoan origin." Kirk was about to point out that they would find more conclusive evidence in the wreck when the discussion was interrupted by the breathless arrival of two females at the far end of the chamber. They rushed forward.

Kirk noted that no one objected to their entrance, no one sought to bar them from the room. This society had much to commend it, he reflected.

"Important news, High Tribune."

Domar made a curt gesture. "Speak."

"Several air-breathers have invaded the outskirts of the cultivated areas. We saw them. They were moving toward the city. They glowed most strangely."

"That's only...," Kirk began, but Doman drowned him out as he turned angrily to the Junior Tribunes. "Defensive screens, as the records speak of! Do you still believe these creatures come in peace?"

Some of Rela's self-righteous assurance faded, apparently drained by this unexpected information. "We do not know what to believe," she finally whispered unhappily.

Domar looked satisfied, turned his attention to the pair of guards who stood ready behind Kirk and Spock.

"Take these spies to the surface and leave them there. They wish to return to their element. So be it. Justice enough for our enemies...!"

IV

Kirk choked, gasped for breath. He got a half mouthful of water and gulped it gratefully.

Whether Domar, the other Tribunes, or the guards were responsible for the particular agony he and Spock were being subjected to he didn't know. But right now all he wished for was a smooth scaly neck under his fingers.

They had been taken to the spot where McCoy and Scott had found them and tied securely to the low-lying boulders there, just barely above the water line. Occasionally a wave would sweep over the rocks and give them a momentary respite from slow suffocation.

But the steady deprivation of air-rich water was making them weaker and weaker. At their present infrequent intake, they wouldn't last much longer. Nor was there any hope here of a life-giving incoming tide.

So weak were they that neither saw the slim form which swam nearby, staring at them sadly. Rela.

A glint of metal as the wave receded elsewhere caught her eye and she kicked toward it, her flippers propelling her rapidly through the water. Holding her breath, she poked her head and arms out of the water and examined the shards and scraps with a kind of resigned curiosity. Several of the pieces were bigger than she was and were almost intact. She noticed that one seemed to have some kind of writing etched into it. With her finger, she traced the cryptic indentations.

U.S.S. Enterprise ... the bumps meant nothing to her, of course.

Another section, caught high up on a rocky projection, caught her eye. She took a deeper breath, raised her head and

stared. It seemed to be part of a dome ... a dome of some strange, transparent material. Judging from its curve, it must have enclosed , a substantial area, though she couldn't get any good idea of its original size or shape. She clambered out onto the rocks, struggling clumsily.

Beneath the broken dome was a section of metal lined with interesting instruments. There were also several sealed cases which had broken loose from their catches and tumbled about within. One was jammed shut, but two of the others lay broken open, their contents scattered nearby.

She picked up the remains of what seemed to be a book - but the material was impossibly, incredibly fragile. Opening it carefully, she thumbed through it, her eyes growing wider and wider at each subsequent waterlogged revelation.

There were pictures of strange vessels, others of absurd underwater creatures she had never seen, and others - of air-dwellers! Such incredible monsters couldn't possibly exist ... on her world, she realized with a start.

And that meant ... she plunged into the water, swam furiously, perilously close to the sharp edges of the rocks. Taking another deep breath she scrambled up onto the flat boulder to which Kirk was bound, knelt over him.

"Conserve your strength," she bubbled, "I will free you ... somehow."

She tugged at the cords, trying to loosen the knots. She dug her flippers into a crack in the rocks and pulled with all her strength, gasping, straining, water running out her mouth and down her chin. No use.

While Kirk continued to gasp weakly she turned and plunged her head back under the surface for a long moment. Coming back up she said in that odd, gurgling voice, "The mesh is too strong!"

"Go," Kirk somehow managed to sputter, "toward the big island ... assistance there, maybe ... friends..."

Rela nodded, or at least that was the impression Kirk had. After giving both men long draughts of fresh water, she plunged back in and disappeared.

If, Kirk mused painfully, she decided not to come back...

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Clayton looked over the side of the gig. A moment later, Scott, the lime-yellow aura of his life-support belt still glowing brightly, popped up. He reached up, clung to the side of the small craft.

"See anything?" asked Clayton. Scott shook his head dispiritedly.

"Still no sign of 'em. I wish we carried more underwater equipment. The captain and Mr. Spock are adapted for gettin' around in this environment. We just can't match 'em, tryin' to swim in a life-support aura.

"Besides which, the directional tracker isn't pickin' up their signal anymore. Lost it a while back and I'm damned if I know why ... unless their translators are broken." He patted the one affixed to his own chest beneath the green bodysuit.

"The only signal I get now is from mine, and I'm not too sure *it* works. I thought I saw some big, man-shaped form watchin' us from one of the big kelp beds. I yelled at *it* and *it* disappeared."

"It might have been a fish," Clayton argued, "but I suppose it could have been one of our mysterious locals. I don't think it's the translator, sir, I..." He broke off, staring, as an alien shape broke the water only a couple of meters from the gig. His phaser came around automatically.

But it lowered at the same time they were given proof of the translator's efficacy.

"Follow me, quickly!" Rela implored. Without waiting for a reply, she turned and started off in the direction of the distant boulders.

"Wait a minute!" Scott shouted hurriedly, "who are...?"

Rela whirled in the water, yelled back at them. "Follow me. Your friends need your help." She ducked her head and shot off again.

While Scott climbed into the gig, Clayton focused his telefocals on the distant, moving fin. "I've got her clearly, Mr. Scott. She's swimming just under the surface."

Scott nodded, switched off his life-support belt and moved to the controls of the gig. A second later the powerful side jets came to life and the compact vessel shot off in pursuit.

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Kirk's chest felt like the rotten leather of an old bellows, and his hoarse rasping sounded like one. There were more pleasant ways to die, he thought, than suffocating to death. He sensed its nearness, and the first hallucinations confirmed it.

It started with the gurgling shout he dreamt he heard nearby. Vague forms seemed to move before his glazed eyes, almost human ... angels, perhaps? It seemed that hands fumbled at his sides...

A warm coolness washed over him ... a temperature incongruity? No ... he drew in another breath, felt himself growing stronger, drew another and another.

His vision cleared with awesome abruptness, and he found himself staring into the non-angelic but no less welcome face of an anxious Scott. He sat up, looked around. Spock stared back at him across the sandy bottom.

Scott joined them, once again activating his yellow halo. Kirk seated himself on something soft and, he hoped, nonlethal.

"*Good* to see you, Scotty."

"Not as good as it is to see you, Captain." The look in the chief engineer's eyes embarrassed Kirk. He turned to Rela.

"Rela, this is my chief engineering officer, Mr. Scott. Tribune Rela is an Argoan-Aquan, as their name for themselves translates. Their city is a short distance away. I'm afraid Mr. Spock and I didn't make a very favorable impression on its rulers."

"We're obliged for your help," Scott said hurriedly, forcing gaze and curiosity away from the drifting Rela. "Captain, we've been trying to contact you for two hours. There's a severe quake due in this area soon. According to the seismology people, it will disrupt this entire region. That won't bother us, of course, but..."

The translators were good, not perfect. Some of the strange mouthings of the air-breathers came to Rela garbled and devoid of crucial nuances. But if some of the terminology was vague, the look Scotty gave her was enough to put his point across.

"There are many legends of such events," she told them. "When the great surface places sank into the sea. Much of the knowledge of the ancients was destroyed."

"I still do not understand," put in Spock, "how such a radical, complete racial mutation could take place in such a short time."

"You are right, Mr. Spock," Rela complimented him. "Evolution played no part in it. When the surface places began to sink, many air-breathers - my distant ancestors - were altered to breathe and live beneath the sea by surgery, as you were. Such surgery extended even to the..." it came out "genes."

"Thus, the change was made hereditary - for those who accepted the change. There were those who did not ... hence my people's instinctive fear of you."

"Strange that the air-breathing remainder of your race should turn to useless violence," Kirk wondered, "considering their accomplishments."

"It seems as if those who remained on the surface didn't believe the continental subsidence would be this extensive,"

Spock theorized. "I would guess that somewhere, sometime, they lost the ability to change themselves into water-breathers. A few generations would serve to breed sufficient hatred and envy for those immune to the coming catastrophe."

"They hunted and killed among us," Rela recounted grimly. "We learned to hate anything that lives in the air. That is why it has always been forbidden to mutate back to such a state."

A startled glance passed between Kirk and Spock before the Captain commented excitedly to her, "Then reverse surgery is possible. Domar lied to us."

"Not wholly," Rela corrected. "There are stories of sealed places in the ancients' air-city where many records remain. It is rumored that..."

A dull rumbling echoed through the water around them. Sand was jolted upward, fish scurried frantically for the nearest cover, and Kirk and Spock found themselves bounced from their seats. The turbulence sent Scott and Rela tumbling slightly.

Sand continued to cascade in gritty falls from clumps of rock, clouding the water with drifting debris.

"Less than two hours," Scott warned them.

"How far are these ruins, Rela?" Kirk asked

"Not far ... in a direction away from the city."

Kirk already had his mind made up ... but a second opinion was always good policy. "Mr. Spock?"

"We have no choice, Captain. If there is a chance for us, it lies there."

"But these are only stories," said Rela, alarmed at the reaction her information had produced. "In any case, I cannot take you there. It is against the Ordainments."

Kirk swam close to her. "It's vital, Rela. Not just for Mr. Spock and myself, but for the population of another world much like yours, threatened with similar disaster. Argo's ancient knowledge could help save them."

The Aquan hesitated, staring at the three aliens. If she chose to whirl and swim away it was doubtful that either Kirk or Spock could catch her. She made a sharp, enigmatic gesture.

"I will take you as far as the reef barrier." And before anyone could thank her, she had turned and started off at a right angle from the course back to the sunken city.

Kirk and Spock followed, having to push themselves to keep pace. It seemed as if they swam for hours, traveling over the endless amber-tinted plain, dodging coral heads and dunes.

Kirk noticed the way the fish thinned out as they moved on, and he wondered. Maybe it was something in the water, or maybe a lack of nutrients.

Rela seemed to be growing more and more nervous the further they swam, her eyes darting constantly in all directions. Looking for an aqueous poltergeist, he decided, would be a particularly difficult proposition.

It turned darker as they neared a barrier. A long, winding reef, much like the one he and Spock had encountered on their way to the Aquan city. Only this one was still living.

Rela came to a stop, gestured upward toward a wide-mouthed hole in the rampart, lined with plants which jerked and swayed violently.

"The ruined city lies through there. Take care, the currents are strong."

"Aren't you coming with us?" Kirk asked.

"No," she replied emphatically, backing away, "I can go no further. I will wait for you with your friends."

She turned and, kicking powerfully, raced off into the distance. They would be wasting time and probably effort in trying to convince her to come with them. As one, both officers moved cautiously toward the gaping cavity.

Kirk soon felt a slight rippling of water over his body. It increased rapidly. Soon he was exerting all his strength just to stay in one place - but to no avail. The current had a firm grip on them and was pulling them inexorably into the cavern.

The interior of the cave soon showed blue sky overhead ... it was another reef rift, not a tunnel. But the walls of this one were lined with jagged spikes of dead coral, twisted spines representing the combined toil of a billion tiny lives.

He fought the current, glad of his webbed hands and feet, as the suction pulled at them. Kicking furiously to stay level and at the same time avoid a reaching coral pike, he found himself wondering why Rela simply hadn't directed them to go over the top of the reef. The currents might be strong there, too, but could they be this violent?

Then it came to him. The reef probably stayed near the surface in most places, even breaking through. The idea of walking across the reef on one's flippers had probably never occurred to her.

Without warning, they were ejected from the reef. They came to a tumbling halt, still amid stone, but stone whose edges were not formed by a patient nature.

They were drifting in a giant's playpen of crumbling blocks and archways and unbalanced pylons - all jumbled together by some unimaginably violent cataclysm in Argo's past.

Down they drifted, past spires, turrets, towers, structures that resembled great temples, others that encircled a coral-encrusted marketplace. All alien, but still more familiar than the underwater city of the Aquans. This was a city made to live in the currents of wind, not water. A broad avenue curved away before them, lined with a crazy-quilt pattern of broken stone and paved here and there with the ever-present amber moss. Much of the sunken metropolis was overgrown with

waving plant life. It stretched off to the horizon, dwarfing the city of the Aquans.

"Fascinating," Spock murmured. "Probably an entire portion of the continent sank within minutes and with minimal upheaval."

"Rela said the records repository would be a tall, triangular structure," Kirk reminded him. They started down the relatively clear avenue, eyeing dark crannies and long shadowed areas cautiously.

Of course, the Aquans' "Ordainments" were standard, susperstitious taboos, but that didn't mean this skeleton city couldn't be home to some less ecclesiastical dangers.

As they moved deeper into the ruins they encountered buildings in a better state of preservation. Slanted towers rose around them, jagged cracks showing in their walls. But they still stood. How many more serious tremors their weakened foundations could stand Kirk could not tell.

The boulevard made a sharp turn to the right and they found themselves facing a broad plaza. At its far side stood a tall, pyramidal building. A deeply etched, gold-colored medallion was set into its top. The Argoan hieroglyphics were hardly eroded, testament to the knowledge of Rela's ancestors. The medallion shone brightly in the urban graveyard, catching the filtered sunlight

At first it appeared the structure was blessed with a multitude of entrances. Ruined windows, broken doors - but all were blocked by internal collapse. They began to circle the building, checking each opening.

Then Spock spotted the large block that projected outward at the base of the building. Brushing aside sand, prying away encumbering shells, they uncovered a flat stone of a substance substantially different from the rest of the building. It looked more like alabaster than anything else, yet it was clearly artificial. Most important, there was a metallic emblem set into its front that matched the big disk at the building's apex.

Spock swam to the far side, dug webbed feet into the sand and shoved. For a moment nothing happened, then the block suddenly slid aside as though oiled.

Their lights revealed a clear passageway leading upward as far as the beams would reach ... and steps, honest steps.

A short swim brought them to the first of many interconnected chambers. Every other room was lined with drawers and cases of metal. After a little initial tugging, they came apart and broke open easily. Most of the cases were badly corroded, their contents long since destroyed.

Some, however, remained sealed, and these all had tiny plates of gleaming gold set into them. Each plate had a miniature bas-relief engraved in it, underlined by more of the indecipherable hieroglyphics. They went through a seemingly endless stream of sealed containers. In the sixth chamber Spock held one of the containers out and called to Kirk. Kirk dropped the one he was studying and swam over.

Alongside the expected rows of hieroglyphs was cut the form of an upright human figure, split down the middle. One side of the torso was normal. The other resembled, more than anything else, the body of a fish.

"I do not think the meaning could be more clear, Captain." Spock gestured at the open case behind him. "There are three others set with the same engraving, a fourth with something rather nauseating. I only hope they hold medical records and not the reproduced work of some long-dead Argoan surrealist."

The men swam rapidly now, tracing their path back out of the temple or museum or hospital or whatever it had been, back toward the edge of the city.

A long, curved pillar marked the end of the avenue, a roadblock to fleeing inhabitants during the age-old disaster, but not to swimmers. The obstruction lay across the road from still upright cousins, supporters of a dark mausoleum to their right.

Spock started upward then halted in mid-stroke. Kirk pulled up just as sharply behind him. He had noticed the movement in the fallen column, too.

Another column joined the first, fluttering. A huge form rose into view from behind the partly ruined structure. They weren't stone, those columns; and Kirk frantically damned himself for not recognizing the first.

They were the arms of a creature they had met before, a creature capable of blind fury and incredible strength. If anything, this snake-squid was even bigger than the one that had destroyed the shuttle.

They turned and swam furiously back up the avenue. The snake-squid started to follow, its roars rattling Kirk's water-filled ears. Evidently they had stumbled across one that had been half asleep, or they would both have been fish-fodder already.

He looked back over his shoulder. The muscles in his legs were starting to knot up under the unaccustomed demand. The monster was still well behind them, but closing ground fast. It still wasn't fully awake.

Another roar shook him - literally. A deeper, grinding scream that sent him tumbling head over heels. Walls and towers came crumbling down around them as the quake tortured the old buildings. Kirk held onto his two cylinders for dear life.

One gigantic block of cut stone struck their pursuer near the skull. It paused, drifted motionless in the water for a moment, stunned. Then it suddenly turned - all thoughts of tiny prey forgotten now - and rocketed away.

For long minutes they lay in the protective shadow of the hospital-temple, ready to dart back into the entranceway at the first sign of a probing tentacle.

"A most interesting creature," Spock commented. "Instinctively aggressive and blessed with remarkable offensive equipment. It would be interesting to..."

Kirk managed a grin, held up the pair of cylinders he was carrying. "If these don't contain the necessary medical information, we may have an ample number of years to study it first hand."

No further tremors troubled them as they left the city this time, nor did they encounter the snake-squid or any other predator.

Returning through the hole in the reef was pretty much out of the question. Possibly one of Rela's people could have bucked the powerful current, but Kirk didn't think his legs could manage it. Fortunately, they were able to confirm an earlier supposition.

Swimming upward, they discovered that the reef did indeed break the surface in numerous places. By walking carefully and taking deep breaths at the multitude of pools that pockmarked the top, they were able to cross it on foot. Even so, Kirk was relieved when they finally reached the far side and were able to descend once again. He could understand why the Aquans were reluctant to consider such an idea.

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One sealed cylinder proved a complete dead end, but the others contained between them the complete details of the air-to-water mutation procedure, as well as water-to-air. There was also a great amount of additional information which kept much of the *Enterprise*'s scientific staff drooling over the shoulders of the linguists. As each new revelation or bit of ancient theory was translated, a small covy of men and women would bear away their booty for intensive study with all the enthusiasm of a bunch of Goths at the sack of Rome.

Kirk pressed up against the glass of the water room and stared out at McCoy. Two-way pickups brought the soft click-click of the computer annex through to him as the doctor ran through the relevant material a final time.

McCoy was hoping to find a substitute for the prescribed methodology. Failing that, he had searched for a substitute for

one particular compound. No use. The formula specified by the ancient Argoans was inflexible.

Turning, he spoke into the pickup. "If the translations are all correct, Jim, the mutations are brought about by a timed series of injections. To return your circulatory and respiratory systems to normal, supposedly all we have to do is provide you with sufficient dosages at properly spaced intervals."

Kirk waited. When McCoy didn't continue, he ventured, "Only ... there's a problem."

"Yes. I can duplicate most of the required chemicals in the lab ... except for a derivative from a local venom. Weirdest arrangement of proteins you ever saw. No way I can synthesize it."

"All right," Kirk replied calmly, "where do we get it?"

"It's a good thing the chemical text was accompanied by diagrams ... and pictures. Not surprisingly, the venom is produced by the poison glands of a large local meat-eater. Judging by both the visual and written material, its not as rare as the Argoans wished it was."

He touched another switch, punched out a combination on a keyboard in the annex. There was a hum and a sheet of printed plastic popped out of a slot. McCoy took it, walked over to the glass and pressed the sheet up against it.

Kirk and Spock studied the carefully reproduced drawing made by some long-dead Argoan biologist. They ignored the translated text because they didn't need it. The creature sported a snakelike body, a circular, toothed gullet, and four enormous tentacles.

McCoy pulled the sketch away. "I don't know where you're going to find one, or how you're going to capture it. The venom must be taken while the creature is alive and active. A phaser stun would numb the poison-injection mechanism. Dissection is out, too, because death causes the venom to lose its potency immediately. It's got to be gathered while the creature is alive and kicking."

"Don't worry about us finding one, Bones," Kirk assured him. "As for handling a live one, we've already had plenty of experience in how not to..."

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Rela had arranged a clandestine meeting on the outskirts of the cultivated areas. The two other young Tribunes, Nefrel and Lemas, listened attentively to Kirk's description of the impending quake. Their looks turned to alarm when he began to detail the request.

"We need your help to capture one of the snake-squids ... alive," he told them, "snake-squid" coming out as a series of unpronouncable gurglings. "We can't do it ourselves - the only craft we possess for performing such tasks here was destroyed by one of the creatures."

The three young Aquans exchanged uneasy glances. "Rela was observed leading you toward the Forbidden Zone," Nefrel explained. "Domar has warned us that if we break the Ordainments again we risk being exiled to the open seas."

"We cannot reverse the mutations you induced in us without the serum the captain has told you about," Spock said firmly, "and we cannot make that serum without the snake-squid's venom."

"But the Ordainments," Nefrel persisted, "also state that capturing one is forbidden."

"See how all is cleverly tied together!" Lemas exclaimed. "It is forbidden to capture a *cpheryhm-aj* because its poison is needed to reverse the sea-change. Tell me, Nefrel, will the Ordainments protect us from the upheaving of the sea-floor? These travelers say their science can help us, but we must help them first. That is just."

Kirk didn't bother to correct Lemas. They would aid the Aquans as best they could, no matter what.

"We must break the Ordainments, Nefrel," insisted Rela, "even if Captain Kirk could not aid us."

The reluctant Tribune finally acquiesced, whereupon the five left the meeting place and started back toward the sunken city of the ancients.

"We do not need to return to *Llach-sse*," Lemas told him. "We can obtain what we need from the outlying storehouses."

Kirk's confidence suffered an unexpected letdown when he saw that the three Aquans intended to use to capture one of the huge carnivores. It was a net ... uncomplicated, with no secret devices of a subtle undersea science concealed in it.

Of course, he and Spock had been unable, despite their most violent efforts, to so much as loosen a strand of the net that had been used to capture them. Maybe the material was far stronger than he had suspected. He eyed the thin webbing and hoped so.

This was no time for criticism of the Aquans' efforts - he had to hope they knew what they were doing.

The next step took a great deal of persuasion on Kirk and Spock's part. Lemas and Nefrel in particular refused to believe one could simply walk over the forbidden reef and avoid the treacherous, current-torn crevice.

But exhilaration replaced fear when they finally completed the crossing, without a single injury or moment of panic.

Trying to stay out of sight as much as possible, they circled the city and approached the entrance from behind, from the region of the hospital-temple. Kirk hoped they would be able to find the large *cypheryhm-aj* that had ambushed them before.

Rela was swimming well in advance of the rest of the party. Suddenly, she put up a hand in a trans-cultural gesture, and they moved up quietly alongside her.

When Kirk and Spock had stumbled across the snake-squid it had been dazed and drowsy, half asleep. Now it appeared fully quiescent, perhaps sleeping off the blow it had absorbed

from the falling stone. It lay motionless on the sand, coiled in among a cluster of huge boulders.

Kirk knew how deceptive that peaceful scene was. At any moment, any suspicious sound, the monster might awaken and make a quick meal of them all. That another timely quake would be in the offing was highly unlikely.

Carefully the three Aquans unrolled their weighted net. Lemas and Nefrel unfurled it while Rela took care to keep it parallel to the bottom and untangled.

At a mutual sign, they started swimming smooth and fast for the snake-squid.

Either they reached a crucial point or someone lost his nerve, because both Lemas and Nefrel suddenly stopped moving forward. Rela let go of the back end of the net. Inertia and weight kept the net moving forward and curving slightly downward. All three Aquans retreated toward the crumbled wall they had left... and waited, and watched.

Falling in a gentle arc, the net kept its shape as it neared the bottom, began to settle softly over the snake-squid. The beast quivered slightly when the first strands touched it; but when the body of the net made contact, the *cpheryhm-aj* erupted.

While Kirk and Spock watched anxiously, unable to intervene for fear of getting in someone's way at a critical moment, the three Aquans shot downward.

The more the monster struggled, the tighter the mesh was drawn. Both officers admired the design of the net, which they now saw was equipped with an intricate series of cross-pulls and cords that tightened around any prey.

And Kirk's hopeful analysis of the netting was proven correct ... not a strand parted, not a square broke.

Judging from the urgency in Rela's voice as she yelled to them to hurry, its invincibility was finite, however. Both officers moved rapidly downward, hurriedly readying the makeshift container-collectors McCoy had designed, flexible pouches

from each of which protruded a long suction tube with a wide mouth.

The snake snake-squid had a better view of the officers than it did of the dodging, darting Aquans. Tentacles and teeth strained for the two maddeningly near shapes. Reflex reaction sent a jet of dark fluid toward both men.

Kirk edged the mouth of a suction tube into the slowly dispersing cloud, touched a control on the side of the tube. He moved the flexible gathering mouth from side to side. McCoy had warned them that they needed as much venom as they could obtain.

Dark poison dissipated around the captain. The Aquans had assured him the poison was harmless unless injected. He kept that resolutely in mind as he directed the tube toward a darker patch, missed it when a sudden current sent him tumbling.

Rubble showered down from surrounding towers. Much of the already battered structure they'd hidden behind came down. Some of the venom already collected drifted from the open mouth of the suction tube and Kirk hurriedly closed it off. A series of violent after-shocks made things more difficult. Rela was alongside him unexpectedly, watching the procedure worriedly. She directed his attention downward.

While the admirable material of the net had proven equal to the explosive spasms of the snake-squid, it had fallen victim to some of the toppling stone. Rocks and carved pillars had driven the pinioned carnivore into a frenzy. They had also abraded sections of the net to the point where the monster was able to break them.

It was still trapped, still bound awkwardly ... but it had discovered the weakened portions and was tearing at them with mindless malevolence.

"We must leave now, quickly," Rela insisted. She turned, started for the top of the reef where they would be safe.

Kirk examined a gauge set in the side of the tube, called after her. "We need more venom."

"There is no time!" she shouted back. "There..."

A thunderous, echoing moan drowned out her last words. Two of the muscular tentacles and part of the upper body of the snake-squid were already free of the netting. Another minute or two and the creature would free the rest of its thick torso. They couldn't hope to outswim the maddened beast.

Cursing silently, Kirk raced off in pursuit of the retreating Aquans. Spock risked a reaching tentacle for one last inhalation of poison before following.

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Kirk had tried floating on his head, swimming off the walls, counting rocks - in general, doing everything imaginable to dampen his impatience while McCoy ran a final series of checks on the mildly toxic chemical.

So many things could go wrong if even a small portion of the ancient formulae was wrong, out of date, inaccurately set down. And there was no Aquan physician present to look for signs of failure.

Kirk studied McCoy and Nurse Chapel as they moved slowly in their underwater gear - too much precision was required now for life-support belts.

With Chapel's aid, McCoy was locking a small bottle of fluid into a spray-contact hypo. Now, if only Spock's metabolism and his would adapt to Argoan medical procedure as readily as did Bones' equipment.

McCoy's voice, distorted by the broadcast apparatus and the intervening water, broke the nervous silence.

"We've set this up as best we can, Jim. Only a small section of the relevant records was missing. I don't think - I *hope* - it isn't critical."

"But I thought you said...," Kirk began.

McCoy made calming motions. "Oh, I'm sure about the composition of the serum, Jim, that portion of the records is intact and plenty scientific. The section that's missing..." He shook his head.

"Something to do with the dosage per unit of body weight. I've had to approximate without the complete charts. We

might never turn them up." He motioned the two men toward the bedlike slabs that would serve as a resting place.

"The experiments I ran on local fish-life show that if the serum dosage is too strong, it causes an over-mutation which then can't be reversed by any means. Inject too little and there can be violent side effects. The stuff is tricky, and too potent for my liking.

"I'd like to conduct further experiments, but we..."

"Haven't got enough venom," Spock finished for him.

"Not only that, but the potency of what you brought back fades rapidly. The composite serum has to be used right away. If you could obtain some more..." He stared at Kirk, but the captain made a negative gesture.

"We've already drawn on our credit with Rela and her friends to the point of exhaustion, Bones. I'm not sure we could convince them to repeat the hunt. I'm not sure I want to ... we might not be so lucky a second time." McCoy sighed, resigned.

"Then I'll have to make do. I've decreased the maximum allowable dosage by one quarter - that should be proper for your systems, Vulcan as well as human."

Kirk nodded. "All right. How many infusions?"

"Two small, one large."

"Let's get started."

Both officers assumed reclining positions on the slabs, head higher than feet McCoy checked a gauge on the side of the hypo, made a last adjustment If he had miscalculated half a cubic centimeter either way, the damage to their bodies could be irreversible.

McCoy pressed the hypo's nozzle to Kirk's upper arm, then stepped back and studied his wrist chronometer intently. Several minutes slid by before the first change appeared.

Kirk's skin was changing, the pigmentation darkening slightly. First it deepened to a rich golden hue, then to a familiar amber. The captain's lids drooped low, lower, finally closed tightly.

Abruptly, the amber color drained like bourbon from a broken bottle, leaving Kirk a pale, nearly albino white. They all studied him anxiously, but he showed no signs of movement. McCoy frowned uneasily and hurried to exchange the hypo for a pre-keyed tricorder.

He passed it carefully over Kirk's limp form, muttering to himself all the while. "Pulse fading ... all internal functions slowed ... heartbeat weakened..."

"Andrenalin ... aldrazine?" ventured Chapel. McCoy shook his head, pulled the 'corder away.

"There's enough in his system now that doesn't belong there. Give the serum another couple of minutes."

Sure enough, normal color began to tint Kirk's face, returning with the same suddenness it had departed. He stirred slightly on the makeshift pallet.

Chapel let out a bubbling sigh of relief. Spock remained expressionless as usual, but McCoy noticed how an unnatural tenseness had suddenly left the first officer's muscles.

Again he made a pass with the tiny machine. "Pulse and heart normal, other shifts within acceptable parameters ... good. Nurse?"

Chapel handed him the second of the three bottles and he exchanged it for the first, reset the dial on the side of the hypo. This time he pressed it over the Captain's chest, just below the left lung, held it there a second, then moved it to the right side and repeated the injection.

Kirk's body reacted instantly this time, jerking spasmodically on the slab like a puppet with snipped strings. Before McCoy could have countered with another injection of any kind, Kirk

collapsed. Once more the amber hue flooded his face. Once again McCoy used the compact 'corder.

"Something's really given his system a kick - his metabolism's a good ten times normal speed."

"Doctor," Spock interrupted, "his hands."

McCoy's gaze moved down the unconscious form. The thin webbing which had formed between the fingers was dissolving like so much gelatin, the faint scaling beginning to smooth out. His stare went lower and he saw that the same process was at work on the feet.

McCoy checked his watch, made yet another pass with the instrument.

"Metabolism normal - and everything else!" He couldh't keep the optimism from his voice, didn't want to. "Indication of physiological alteration in the lungs ... he's beginning a complete reversal. Nurse..."

Chapel handed him the final bottle. Carefully McCoy locked the vial in place beneath the pistol-like hypo.

"This is the final dose," he said, to no one in particular. "The major infusion. Roll him over please, Christine."

Chapel slowly turned Kirk on his stomach ... easy enough in the water. McCoy recalled the translated instructions, prayed that the ancient recorder was precise in his technique and made the last injection as it had been described.

He pulled the hypo away, nodded to her. She turned Kirk over on his back again, let him relax. Nothing happened. McCoy was about to program a minute secondary dose when Kirk suddenly doubled up in agony, his legs threshing wildly and an expression of pure pain invading his face.

The pitiful moans of a man having nightmares filled the water around them. Scales erupted like scars on his face and the backs of his hands.

Twitching with uncontrollable violence, he spun from the pallet and onto the sand. So powerful were the jerks and kicks that McCoy and Spock were unable to get a grip on him.

Finally the explosion quieted and Kirk came to rest motionless and face down on the sand. The back of the skin-tight green bodysuit started to bulge slightly, showing an eruption of dorsal fin. Chapel didn't scream - she'd seen too many mistakes of nature in McCoy's lab to be terrified by another - but her eyes widened in horror. Spock, uncharacteristically, looked helpless.

"Too strong ... the serum was too strong!" McCoy groaned. The spasms struck again and once more Kirk was thrashing water. The amber color deepened even further and revealed a faint yellowish overlay.

But this time, as he twisted in the sand, the scales that had formed momentarily on his face and hands began to fade, the bulge on his back disappeared and was reabsorbed.

The kicking and tumbling slowed, stopped. As he lay still on the bottom the yellow tinge vanished from his skin, followed soon thereafter by the amber. McCoy drifted over to the limp form. Again the tiny tricorder did its work.

When McCoy looked up again there was a note of satisfaction in his voice. "He's starting to breathe steadily again. Quick, we must get him out of the tank."

Together, the three of them wrestled the motionless body into the airlock. Spock remained inside. While McCoy supported Kirk, Chapel manipulated the controls. Both watched Kirk's face nervously as the drains in the floor rapidly sucked the water from the lock.

Kirk started to choke, flailing at the water with both arms. McCoy didn't wait for the water to leave completely. Instead, he slammed a palm down on the red button on the console labeled *Emergency Cycle*.

They nearly fell as a gush of water half-carried them from the airlock. Together they laid the captain on the floor. He stopped

kicking almost immediately, coughed a couple of times, water dribbling from one side of his mouth.

Then he rolled over, still wheezing, but with less force now. The coughing finally died and then he was breathing deeply again - and for the first time in a long while, normally.

"Easy, Jim, how do you feel?"

Kirk continued to take long draughts of air, eyed McCoy as if the doctor were a little unbalanced. "Tired, a bit dizzy ... otherwise fine."

Chapel reappeared with a large thermal blanket. She draped it around Kirk's shoulders as he got to his feet.

"Better make dry clothes your first priority, Jim," McCoy advised him. "Along with the metamorphosis of your respiratory and circulatory systems, there've been some extensive changes in your epidermal layers. I half anticipated them, from what the old records said. But so help me, I didn't think they'd come color-coded!" He grinned. "After what you've just been through, it would be damned silly for you to catch a cold."

Kirk nodded, then McCoy turned his attention to the water room's remaining occupant. "You're turn next, Spock, if after watching, you still want to go through with it."

Spock's gaze remained on Kirk. Only when the captain finally gave him an "everything's okay" smile did he reply, "I await the procedure with a modicum of impatience, Doctor." That was just Spock's way of saying the waiting was driving him up the walls.

***

Kirk sat down in the command chair ... slowly, enjoying the use of his legs for something other than horizontal locomotion, luxuriating in the chair's dryness more than anything else.

He looked left, to where Spock and Scott were explaining the various functions of the bridge's instrumentation to the goggling Domar and Rela.

Both Tribunes wore body suits and transparent, water-filled masks. Their tanks rested on the back of the wheelchairs that Scott's people had improvised.

It had taken all Scott's persuasive powers to convince even the adventurous Rela that the strange attire would keep them alive and healthy out of the water. But it was Domar who had agreed to the trial visit to the *Enterprise* first.

The qualities which had made him High Tribune dictated that he not appear craven before mere air-breathers, nor allow a Junior Tribune to seem the braver. Actually, he resented the powered chairs more than the water-suits. But while his legs were immensely powerful, they would tire rapidly under the steady pull of gravity in a waterless environment - and his flippers were not designed for walking.

So it was necessary for him and Rela to tour the *Enterprise* from the self-contained chairs. In the shadow of many wonders, however, he rapidly lost all sense of indignity.

Just now he was staring at a large rectangle of light in the middle of which a multicolored globe hung poised against speckled blackness. The air-breather next to him, the one called Scott, had assured him that what he was looking at was his own world - all of it.

Normally, he would not even have deigned to laugh at the air-breather. But he had seen enough of this magical vessel to convince him that anything might be true. Why, he was still trying to recover from the claim that there was neither water nor air outside this ship!

The one called Kirk, Tribune-equal, was gesturing at the screen. From his chest, a small machine carried mechanical-sounding words to the High Tribune, who struggled to fathom their meaning and glimpsed it dimly. Many of the air-breather's words translated poorly, while others, he was afraid, would remain forever only noises to him.

"Careful placement of a few large photon torpedoes, combined with a selective bombardment of fault areas with phaser beams, should shift the epicenter of the quake sufficiently northward for your city to survive with minimal damage," Kirk was saying.

"That's what the theory claims, anyway. It's a technique we planned to try. Now we have something more than an abstract reason to attempt it for. We think it has an excellent chance of working."

"Ninety-four point seven percent," Spock qualified.

Comprehension of what these people were about to try was enough to finally overcome Domar's aloofness.

"I did not believe such knowledge existed." For the first time he permited himself an open stare of amazement, taking in the entire sweep of the bridge.

"It is incredible ... all of this."

"Approximately three minutes to the first significant fault shift, Captain." Kirk glanced back to the engineering station.

"Thank you, Mr. Scott. Mr. Spock, confirm coordinates for torpedo strike to effect re-alignment of epicenter."

Spock bent over his hooded viewer. "Confirmed, sir." He looked up. "The results should prove most interesting. To my knowledge, this will be the first time in Federation history that a starship's offensive armament has been deployed according to the instructions of the geology section."

Kirk turned his attention to the helm-navigation console. "Mr. Arex, Mr. Sulu, I know that the coordinates and firepower required has all been precalculated and preprogramed. Hold yourselves in readiness, however, for any last minute adjustments. They have a way of cropping up at the most awkward times."

"Aye, sir" ... "Aye, Captain," came the dual acknowledgment.

Kirk nodded once. "Fire torpedoes, first phasers."

Both men initiated the sequence of computer-directed firepower that would alter the internal heavings of a planet.

Far to the north of the submerged Aquan city, several super-fast objects dropped through the amber-hued atmosphere and vanished beneath the surface of the roiling sea. So fast did they travel that there was no towering fountain of water, no great splash where they entered.

Nor was there any sound. But far, far below the waves the multiple detonations of the precisely spaced photon torpedoes created a shock wave felt for hundreds of kilometers around.

Seconds later, while the deep-water creatures and bottom ooze were still settling back into ages-old quiescence, twin beams of light brighter than a sun lit the underwater abyssal plain with a radiance that illumined simple-minded crawlers for the first and last time of their primitive lives.

"Report, Mr. Spock:"

"Too early yet to tell, Captain," Spock declared without looking up from the viewer. "Another minute or so before the major shift is due."

Domar still did not entirely comprehend what was taking place around him. Nor did he understand the process by which certain things were being altered. He knew only that these strange people, these air-breathers from (was it possible?) another world, were presently engaged in some obscure activity that would decide one way or another the fate of his beloved city.

Domar did not for a moment think that whatever the outcome of that activity he, at least, was safe from impending destruction. He *was* aware that the motives of these beings were not wholly altruistic. From what he had been told they had a world of their own much like his on which some day in the future a similar crisis was likely to occur. If proven successful, the methods now being employed to save his people would someday be utilized to save their own.

He mentioned nothing of this. For one thing, everyone in this chamber of miracles was silent and expectant now, in a way that suggested they were hardly indifferent to the outcome of their efforts. For another, voicing his dark suspicions would have been undiplomatic.

Spock's voice, when he finally elected to break the silence, was no higher, no louder, no more expressively modulated than ever. But it resounded on the tense bridge like the brass section of an orchestra.

"Sensors indicate," he announced, "that the epicenter of the just-concluded quake was in the north polar seas, Captain ... a totally uninhabited area, according to Domar's people."

The interpretation was a bit much for even the usually omnipotent translators to manage. Domar looked at once relieved and confused.

"This means, then, that my people are safe?"

"That's right, Tribune," Kirk said happily, turning from the screen to face him. "It doesn't mean, though, that your city won't be subject to such dangers in the future. We can't make the ground around your city more stable. All we can do is bleed the instability to a region where no one will be endangered."

"What the captain is saying, Tribune Domar," Spock elucidated, "is that the technique we have used is effective, if not constructive."

"When can we beam down, Spock?"

"The section of sub-continent on which the Aquan city is built has been subjected to a considerable if not violent realignment of the substrata, Captain. This will stabilize fully within a few hours..."

***

"Where would you like to be set down, sir?"

Kirk took up his position in the transporter alcove, next to Spock. Domar and Rela sat in their chairs by the transporter console, looked on in fascination. They had expressed a desire to see the process by which they'd been brought aboard and would beam down later.

He eyed Chief Kyle thoughtfully. "You have the coordinates of the spot where Dr. McCoy and Chief Scott first found us after we'd been changed?"

Kyle punched appropriate switches, checked a readout and nodded.

"I think that will do, Chief."

"All right, sir. Energizing."

"Perhaps someday, Mr. Spock," Kirk began, as he felt the familiar disorienting caress of the transporter, "they'll take this danged whine out of the transporter mechanism."

Spock didn't have time to reply.

Just before a person winked out for elsewhere the whine rose to an unbearable pitch and for a split second he felt like his teeth were coming apart. Not that they weren't, of course, but the sensation of dental disintegration was distressingly convincing.

The ocean of Argo was as softly amber and calm as Kirk remembered it, with wave-crests the hue of cream chiffon. The memory of the transporter computer was also accurate. They were standing on a pile of jumbled rocks and dead coral, just slightly above sea-level. But something was wrong, something had changed.

The shallow pool where Scott and McCoy had discovered their water-breathing forms lay just below and to their left, all right ... but now it was only a low sand-filled depression scooped out of the rocks. And the little island seemed much increased in area. He looked to the other side, saw jagged bits of metal and plastic. The remains of the long-ruined underwater shuttle.

No, this was their proper pile of stone ... only it had been raised high above the water. Spock noticed Kirk's uncertainty, explained.

"Sensors indicated considerable subsidence of the sea bottom near the quake's epicenter, Captain. It was apparently accompanied by a corresponding rise of the ocean bed in this area."

He pointed behind them.

The basalt fortress which had dominated their attention when they had first set down on Argo now towered even further into the azure sky. The shift here hadn't been unduly violent, for the wreaths of moss drooped undisturbed from unbroken crags and spires. But there was clear evidence of change nonetheless. Instead of dropping sheer into crashing waves, the island was now ringed by a broad beach of dark sand, until recently part of the bottom.

Kirk sniffed, wrinkled his nose and found ample olfactory hints of change, too. Fish and other ocean dwellers, too slow or stupid to flee the slow rise, had been trapped by the receding waters in small pools, now evaporated. Decay had set in with a vengeance and generated a miasma in sharp contrast to the visual splendor of the scene.

But the most spectacular sight of all lay hidden from view until they rounded the crest of the island. It took Kirk only seconds to place that graveyard of toppled towers, imploded domes, tumbled rocks and alabaster walls and foundation stones. Despite the upheaval, the sunken city of the Aquans' air-breathing ancestors had risen once more into the light fairly intact. Now it lay exposed and naked, drying in the bright sun of midday like some massive pressed flower.

"Argo appears to have a new city, Captain," Spock observed, "or rather, one reborn."

"Well put, Mr. Spock," a new voice agreed. They turned.

Domar spoke as he and Rela struggled from the water, masks and tanks still in place. They moved better on the soft sand

than they had on the *Enterprise*, but Kirk and Spock walked politely down to meet them at water's edge, nonetheless.

"We did not entirely escape the effects of the quake," Rela informed them, indicating that she and Domar had beamed down to the city, "but our people survived with minimal damage - and less injury - thanks to your help. If we had remained near what you call the epicenter, we surely would have been destroyed."

"We owe you and your companions much gratitude, Captain Kirk," Domar said gravely. There was an odd emphasis on the word "gratitude," as if the translator had been unable to reflect the Aquan's meaning exactly and had selected only the closest analog.

"Is there nothing we can do for you?"

"The ability to transform us into water-breathers," Kirk explained, "is something on which our scientists have labored for many hundreds of years, with only the most limited success. If we might have permission to make copies of those and other medical records of your ancestors...?"

"All will be placed at your disposal, Captain Kirk." assured Domar. "What we have left, of life as well as knowledge, you have given us. It is yours by right."

Such adulatory obeisance made Kirk acutely uncomfortable. There were many times when Spock's directness was welcome. Now he relieved Kirk by changing the subject.

"The technique of utilizing starship firepower to alter stress patterns in fault systems has been proven effective. By permitting us to do this you have enabled us to test a method which will mean much to threatened Federation worlds with similar problems."

Domar made the Aquan equivalent of a smile. "It takes a consummate diplomat to make salvation come out like an apology, Mr. Spock."

"So bright, so warm it is here!" Rela purred, stretching lazily. "I will be glad when the surface places can be inhabited."

"It will have to be done slowly, carefully," Kirk admonished her. "You'll need more than the ability to breathe air. There's the problem of your skin, for example."

"What's wrong with my skin?"

"As it stands, nothing," Kirk dead-panned. "But it's adapted to a perpetually moist environment. It will dry out, crack, and blister unless given some form of protection ... such as the body suit you're currently wearing."

He frowned abruptly.

"What do you mean, 'inhabited?'"

Domar gestured toward the risen city of the ancients. "The young among us have decided to rebuild the great shelters of our forebears."

"Only the young?" Kirk queried. Domar sounded apologetic.

"Mature Aquans cannot adjust to the thought of becoming air-breathers. There are no formulas in the old records for altering one's outlook on such things. So most of us will remain in the world we know. Air-life is for the pioneers among us."

"Don't lose contact with each other like your ancestors did, in case of another continental adjustment."

"We will pass ordainments to forbid this."

"And this time we won't ignore them," Rela finished impishly.

"It is always the psychological and not physiological differences that are the real dangers," Spock pointed out. He nodded at Kirk. "The history of Captain Kirk's own world is especially revealing in this respect."

Rela stared at Kirk in surprise. "You have water-breathers on your home world too, Captain?"

"No." The young Tribune looked disappointed. "Mr. Spock is referring to the fact that in my people's past, great conflicts took place which supposedly had their root causes in small physical differences, but which were actually centered in the mind. Small minds seize upon such differences to exploit their own mental deficiencies ... apparently a universal trait."

A faint fog began to form in front of his eyes, and he saw that a familiar glow was beginning to distort his view of Spock.

"What happened to the others?" Rela asked quickly. "Were they exterminated?"

"Others?" Kirk's mind reaced. "Oh, you mean the ones who were different? As I said, the bodily differences meant nothing. In the end, the ones with the mental imbalances found themselves pitied into extinction."

"I don't understand, Captain Kirk," came the final confused words of the Aquan, of Rela, the water-sprite.

A mild stab of nausea shook him as his perception of the universe went blotto. "Neither did they," he finished.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" said a puzzled Chief Kyle. Kirk blinked. They were back on board the *Enterprise*. "Did you say something about extinction, sir?"

Kirk noticed Spock was watching him with mild interest "No, Mr. Kyle ... nothing at all. *Execution* ... I was complimenting you on the execution of your duties."

"Thank you, sir," Kyle replied uncertainly.

Kirk stepped out of the transporter alcove, with Spock following right behind. Spock noticed the smile spreading slowly over the Captain's face.

"You find something amusing, Captain?"

"The timing of certain demands made by the human body, Spock."

"Now that is a subject for considerable amusement," Spock agreed drily. "What particular aberration of your unfortunate self strikes you as humorous at the moment?"

"The fact, Spock, that, after all I've gone through this past week, immediately upon leaving Argo I can find myself experiencing the desire I currently do."

"Which is?" his first officer prompted.

Kirk's smile twisted slightly. "I'm thirsty." Spock continued to stare at him and Kirk stopped, his smile fading. "Well, what's the matter, Spock? You may not find it funny, but..."

"It's not that, Captain, the humorous coefficients of the elemental coincidence are decidedly scrutable. I merely am appalled at my lack of basic knowledge where the human body is concerned."

"What do you mean?" Kirk eyed him unsurely.

"I had not known that a case of aggravated thirst..."

"It isn't aggravated," Kirk protested, but Spock ignored and went on.

"...could produce such startling changes in pigmentation. Or perhaps it has nothing to do with thirst at all, but is an after-reaction to our retransformation back to normal."

"Spock, what the hell are you talking about?"

"You will see more clearly in a mirror, Captain. No," he put up a hand to forestall the coming words, "I am not talking in riddles, Captain. You know me better than that. But your coloration most definitely is not normal. How do you feel?"

"Thirsty, as I said ... and a little tired. Normal enough, under the circumstances." His voice turned slightly irritable. "I feel perfectly fine, Spock ... I don't know what you mean. 'Coloration' again! It's nothing at all, nothing at all..."

THE SLAVER WEAPON

(Adapted from a script by Larry Niven)

I

Stardate 5538.6. Transmission/private-personal. Code to officer annual allotment #C-5539, personnel budget U.S.S. *Enterprise*, on patrol in sector (censored) to: Mr./Mrs. Alhamisi Uhura, rural route 5, Kitui province, Kenya state, Africa, Earth 100643.

Begin transmission:

Dear Mom and Dad:

Not much new from out here, since the scenery doesn't change too quickly. By the time this letter reaches you, Dad, the harvest should be in. I hope the corn has done well, because I understand that hog prices are fairly high and are expected to go higher, so you and Mom ought to be able to do very good business this year.

How is everyone else back home? I am fine, thanks, and so is everyone else on board. We are enjoying a little routine, quiet patrolling for a change. Quite a relief after all the trouble we had with the Pandronians. I'm sure you read about that business in the local news. While I'm not at liberty to discuss details, take my word for it that there's more to that story than you've heard. We almost lost Mr. Spock to a (details deleted, ship compucensor).

Dr. McCoy has promised to send brother David some interesting information on the multiple-community Pandronian life systems (at least, anything which Star Fleet doesn't censor). It's purely biological material and should be passable for communication. David could get a paper or two out of it, I think. Dr. McCoy will send it to David's office at Makere University Hospital in Kampala instead of to the house there, so it can be transmitted as official business.

I'm still enjoying my work tremendously and am doing what I really always wanted to do—help to push back the frontiers of knowledge just a little bit. I've never been

sorry for going into Star Fleet or for having specialized in communications.

Do you realize, Mom, that when I'm on duty on the bridge I'm the only one who knows what's going on all over the ship? That's because I'm constantly monitoring interlevel and interdepartmental communications as well as deep-space transmissions. What other career could offer me anything to compare in excitement with what I'm doing right now?

Well, got to go now. This letter will use up all my personal communication's allowance for the next month, so you won't be hearing from me again before then.

Your loving daughter,

Uhura signed the message, punched it into the ship's computer for deep-space transmission, and drifted off into a daydream. She remembered killing the lion.

It was the day after her sixteenth birthday. The midsummer East African sun turned the soil to dust. Motionless regiments of hybrid corn grew higher than a man, hiding any glimpse of the towers of now-distant Kitui or the parched veldt ahead.

Uhura sat pouting beside her father as he guided the car over the lightly traveled roadway. She held the elaborately decorated spear indifferently, though she was careful not to let the sharp point scratch the transparent bubble-dome of the car. There was a certain boy she could have been picnicking with, and she would have far rather been there than here.

"I still don't see why I have to kill a lion, Dad."

Her father looked over at her, smiled through his neatly trimmed beard. "It is traditional. Once upon a time the tradition applied only to manchildren. But"—and his grin grew wider—"you women changed that a couple of hundred years ago. So now the ritual applies to you as well."

"*I* didn't change it." She folded her arms, looked exquisitely bored. The air-conditioning was crawly on her body. The short skirt she wore provided little warmth. "Besides, it's cold in here. Can't I put my shorts and halter back on?"

"Tradition should be upheld, Uhura. Sometimes that's all one has to remind one of the past. Tradition says that to prove you have become a woman, you must kill a lion with a single spear, by yourself. Since you must do this in the manner of your ancestors, that means you must do it wearing their archaic attire also."

She fingered the heavy metal and bead necklaces which hung awkwardly from her neck. "Can I at least take these off? How could anyone fight while wearing five kilos of jewelry?"

Her father tried to soothe her. "Come now, it's not that bad. This will all be over with soon enough. You will do well, too. Your grandfather has foretold it in the bones."

"Chicken bones don't indicate the future." The lithe young girl snorted derisively. "They only indicate the former presence of an unlucky chicken."

"Your grandfather has more respect for ancient lore than most of his contemporaries, and certainly more than you children today! One day you'll admire him for it. Besides, he does no worse with his bones than the computer does when it comes to forecasting long-range weather."

"*He* loads the tapes," she said, but unconvincingly. Grandfather Uchawi was a lovable but peculiar old man.

Her father turned his attention back to the road. "Besides, you've always been a straight-A student in physical education. I trust in that even more than in your grandfather's bones."

Humming silently, the electric vheicle turned off the main roadway and moved down a much narrower path. Traffic here was infrequent. They had emerged from the yellow-green ocean of corn and were traveling over undulating, grassy plains: cattle country. Shining like milk quartz in the noonday sun, the benign crown of white-capped Kilimanjaro gazed down on them. Soon they would leave private land and cross force barriers into the Serengeti.

Uhura regarded her spear again, wishing the ceremonial feathers tied just below the blade were sewn to one of her summer dresses. Matching feathers were tied behind her, to the base of the oval shield and to the second spear she was permitted. This extra spear was a concession to the times. Since the ancient skills were so rarely practiced, she would be

permitted two chances instead of the traditional one. Both weapons, however, looked much too fragile to challenge the tawny king of the veldt.

Her father reached the Serengeti force barrier and turned down a road paralleling it, until they reached a game-park gate. The path beyond was not paved. None of the paths in the vast parkland were.

He exchanged greetings with the automatic gate. It confirmed their names and appointment time and admitted them. For another hour they drove on, passing through rugged brushland. The area looked no different from pictures Uhura had seen of this country as it had been a thousand years ago.

Eventually the land cruiser slowed to a halt, settled gently to the ground. Her father slipped out, helping her with the bulky shield and second spear. Slinging one spear across her back, Uhura, by then resigned to her fate, hefted the shield in her left hand, the other spear in her right, and faced the high thornbrush across the way.

"How will I find the lion?"

"Don't worry, my daughter. The lion will find you. Be ready at all times, don't panic, and remember what you were taught in school."

With that he bestowed a brief, affectionate kiss on her forehead and returned to the land cruiser. She watched it rise, turn, and disappear down the path they'd come.

She stood alone, listening to the warbling of secretive birds.

Her nose itched, and she rubbed it with the hand holding the spear. Clear of the land cruiser's air-conditioning, she was no longer cold. If anything, she was rapidly becoming hot standing in the sun. Then she began to understand the appropriateness of her dress—or rather the lack of it.

With the disappearance of the vehicle, more birds sang freely in the surrounding trees and brush. Sounds of larger creatures moving about reached her. Monkeys, most likely. The sun was beginning to bother her, but she remembered what her lore instructor had told her, and hesitated before retreating into the shade. If there were lions about, the shade was a likely place for them to be resting.

Something brushed a bush on her right. She turned to stare at it, saw only branches. It was probably another monkey. If so, then this would be a safe place to escape from the sun. No monkey would move close to the ground in the vicinity of a lion. But it wouldn't take much to make sure. Finding a suitable rock nearby, she cleared it of ants, aimed it, and threw it into the rustling copse.

Something that sounded like a demolished building crumpling to the earth shook her ears. Though she had heard that thunder on many tapes, the real thing still paralyzed her. A shape the size of a small land cruiser erupted from the brush, an umber nimbus framing a vast mouth full of flashing white fangs.

In place of coherent thought, months of practice at school took over. Instantly Uhura dropped to her right knee. The shield stood braced against her left foreleg as she wrapped both hands tightly around the shaft of the spear, left hand over right as she ground the spear-butt sharply into the dirt.

The lion leaped.

A terrific concussion traveled along her arms and shoulders as the lion came down on the blade of the spear.

A killing strike first time was as much a combination of luck as skill. Uhura had been lucky. She wouldn't need to use the second spear. The point of the first had missed the ribs, slid between them to pierce the heart.

Even so, her posture was not quite perfect and the lion's trailing leg caught her, knocked her over backward, and sent the shield tumbling. But as she rolled to her feet and fumbled for the second spear she saw that the great cat was already lying still on its side. Her first spear protruded brokenly from its chest.

So fast had the attack come that she had the remainder of her allotted hour free. She was sitting in the shade enjoying her sparse lunch when her father finally arrived to pick her up. He emerged from the land cruiser as it settled to the earth. Curious, he inspected the motionless form of the lion, then came over to greet her. Pride glistened in his eyes and she felt a little embarrassed.

"You did very well, child."

"Thanks," she replied. "I'm glad it's over, though." She checked her wrist chronometer. "If we hurry I might still make the end of the picnic."

"That boy again?" He smiled. "All right, we'll hurry."

She pointed to the corpse as they walked toward the vehicle. "I hope I didn't break anything. It hit pretty hard on the spearpoint."

"Don't worry." Her father put an arm around her and playfully tugged the traditional Masai braids that hung from her head. "The operative motors, the generator, and the controlling elements are well protected in the head and legs. I've seen the insides and they're beautifully put together. Made to take a lot of punishment, too. See? The hour's up and they're starting it up again."

Sure enough, the lion rose as they watched. It used one paw to pull the spear free. There was no blood. Just a few shreds of torn plastic. The simulacrum walked over, politely handed Uhura her spear, and loped easily back into the brush.

"What happens, Dad, if somebody misses a kill with both spears?"

"In that case, sugar, the lion comes over, pats you on the head, and goes back into the forest to wait for the next tester like yourself. If you fail, you get to try again in six months."

He regarded the veldt silently for a moment, then added, "In the old days, if you missed with your spears, you never got a second chance."

Another land cruiser had pulled up alongside theirs. Two sixteen-year-old boys jumped out, accompanied by an older man and woman.

"We'd better leave. We're running into someone else's testing hour, and the simulacrum won't begin its stalk until both cars have left."

Uhura trotted alongside her father as they returned to their land cruiser. Both boys eyed her curiously but said nothing. The one nearest her was pretty good-looking, but their minds were elsewhere and she couldn't say anything to them anyhow. That was against the rules.

As she climbed back into the chilled cab of the land cruiser and reached gratefully for her everyday clothes, it struck her

that according to modern tribal tradition she was now a fully adult woman. Probably she was supposed to feel different—excited or something. All she felt was relief that the ordeal was over.

The ritual hadn't been as boring as she had expected, however. The simulacrum of the lion had been *very* real, much more so than the ones she had practiced against in school. But her primary emotion was impatience to return to town.

As the land cruiser hummed smoothly toward the park gate, she wondered for an instant what it must have been like hundreds of years ago, when Masai youths had to go out on their own and confront real lions, not a composite of fluids and metals and circuitry. Ones with real teeth, which could cut through a shoulder in a single snap or crush a skull like an eggshell. She shuddered a little, and this time it wasn't an effect of the air-conditioning.

She had often gazed on the wild lions hunting out in the Serengeti. What made her queasy wasn't the thought of being eaten by one, but the concept of slaughtering one of the magnificent creatures simply to prove a point about aging which she found upsetting. Thank goodness she didn't live in such superstitious times, although her grandfather would have chided her for such disrespect.

II

Something beeped in her ear. Uhura woke with a start and activated the incoming call.

"Message from Starfleet headquarters, relayed, priority coded, Captain."

Kirk turned in the command chair to face her. "Restricted access, Lieutenant Uhura?"

She checked the signal code. "It doesn't say here, sir."

"Put it on the main screen then, Lieutenant."

Uhura complied, and a portrait took shape on the main viewscreen forward. The uniform beneath was not that of a military man but of a United Federation of Planets diplomat. Spock's brows lifted slightly in puzzlement. It was highly unusual for diplomatic information to come directly to them without being shuttled through Starfleet channels. Then the scene enlarged slightly to reveal a commodore sitting alongside. Spock relaxed. The situation had changed from unusual to simply curious.

"Captain Kirk," said the man in the diplomatic attire, "I am Joseph Laiguer, personal envoy and ambassador plenipotentiary to the systems of Briamos. I suggest a moment to familiarize yourself with the basic details of Briamos as supplied to all Starfleet vessels."

"Well, Mr. Spock?" Kirk glanced across at his science officer, who replied softly.

"A fairly recent Federation contact, Captain, on the fringe of explored territory. There are three closely aligned solar systems containing five inhabited worlds comprising the government of Briamos. The Briamosites are technologically advanced and possess their own modest space fleet. They are humanoid, though they average a third of a meter taller than human or Vulcan norm and are reputed to be a polite but suspicious people."

"That matches what I can recall about them. Thank you, Spock."

"You have now had time to discuss Briamos with your officers," the ambassador continued as if no pause in their conversation had taken place. "You may already have asked yourself why I am contacting you directly; also why I am calling from Starfleet headquarters if I am ambassador to these worlds. The answer to both is that I was called back for consultation, unfortunately."

"Why unfortunately?" Kirk asked.

"Because," the ambassador said, leaning forward intently, "it seems that the Briamosites abruptly decided the other day to hold a conference on their homeworld during which they will decide whether or not they will enter into a preliminary alliance—social, cultural, and military—with either the Federation . . . or the Klingon Empire."

What had thus far been a fairly ordinary communication was one no longer. Although no one on the bridge neglected his assignment duties, everyone delegated a portion of his attention to the figure speaking from the viewscreen.

"Observers and representatives of both the Federation and Klingon Empire have been invited to participate in the conference and to present their respective positions regarding the Briamosites' intentions."

"And you can't be there," said Kirk, filling in blanks. "Why not?"

"Among other things," the ambassador explained, "the Briamosites are noted for their impatience." He named a date. "As you can see, it would be impossible for me to reach Briamos from Starfleet headquarters anywhere near the time set for the opening of the conference."

"Are the Briamosites so impatient they wouldn't delay the start of such an important conference until you could arrive?" Impatience was one thing, Kirk thought, but this bordered on downright rudeness.

The ambassador was slowly shaking his head. "It is important to them, Captain Kirk. According to the Briamosite way of thinking, we will be the ones guilty of an insult if we do not arrive in time for the beginning of their conference. Therefore," and he rustled some papers before him officiously, "since the *Enterprise* is patrolling in the Federation sector

nearest to Briamos, you are directed to proceed there, Captain, empowered to act as ambassador-at-large for the Federation with all due powers and rights in my absence and to act for and in the name of the United Federation of Planets." He dropped the papers, regarded the viewscreen pickup solemnly.

Kirk shifted uneasily in his chair. He would far rather have been informed he could expect to deal with a rapacious alien life form than with the intricacies of diplomacy.

As the ambassador concluded his talk, Spock turned and began speaking softly to his computer pickup. There were important preparations to be made, and he was commencing such activities already.

"That's all I have to say." The ambassador looked to his right. As he did so, the view widened to include the officer sitting next to him. "But Commodore Musashi has a few comments to add, I believe."

Kirk had never met the diminutive commodore now gazing out at him, but he knew of him by reputation: an old-line officer famed for directness and the brilliance of his tactical solutions to logistical problems. With the Romulans on one side and the Klingons on the other, plus assorted bellicose organizations in between, the United Federation of Planets had special need of men with Musashi's particular analytical talents. So, while the older officer would no doubt have preferred a ship command to a desk job, the requirements of the Federation kept him tied to Starfleet headquarters.

Kirk could sympathize with what he had heard. Only loyalty kept Musashi active. In Musashi's position, having to battle figures and charts and petty bureaucratic interference, Kirk probably would have resigned. The fact that the commodore remained to serve the Fleet despite personal feelings only made Kirk pay particular attention to what the man was about to say.

"I cannot overemphasize the importance of this assignment to you, Captain Kirk," the commodore began earnestly. "You must keep in mind at all times that these Briamosites are not only not just your average cluster of primitive aborigines, but are one of the most advanced races we have contacted in a hundred years." Spock turned his attention from various

science readouts to pay attention as the commodore paused for effect, then continued.

"Starfleet intelligence has estimated that the five worlds of Briamos have a combined population of well over seven billion. In terms of natural resources these five worlds and the uninhabited satellite worlds of their three systems are quite wealthy. Here at Starfleet the impression of the Briamosites themselves is one of a competent, highly industrious people. It goes without saying that they would be a welcome addition even on a limited-alliance basis to the United Federation."

Musashi leaned back in his seat, sighed deeply. "Unfortunately, they could also become a powerful ally of the Klingons. From what we know of their natural temperament, which borders on brusqueness at times, they could blend in as well with the Klingons as with us.

"Should the Briamosites decide to link themselves with the Klingon Empire and should that relationship be cemented in the future, it would do much more than simply gain the Klingons a powerful friend. Because of their position on the flank of the Empire, the Briamosites could be counted on by the Klingons to anchor that portion of their empire and protect it from attack. Doing so would free their ships immediately to create considerably more mischief elsewhere."

"The term 'mischief is imprecise, but I have no doubt as to the commodore's true meaning." Spock glanced over at Kirk as he spoke.

"I don't think anyone would, Mr. Spock," Kirk agreed.

Once again the pickup concentrated on the ambassador. "There you have the situation, Captain Kirk. We of the Federation Diplomatic Corps wish you luck and know you'll carry out your assignment to the credit of us all. I wish only that I could be there in person to assist you, but space and time preclude it." He paused, obviously trying to think if he'd forgotten anything.

"Again, keep in mind always the Briamosites' natural impatience. We've already contacted them and informed them that our representative—meaning you—will arrive in time for the conference. What else could we say?" He shrugged slightly. "They replied in their gruffly polite fashion that our representatives would be most welcome—indeed, would be

anxiously awaited—but that the conference date is set and will proceed whether or not the *Enterprise* arrives on time." Another pause, and when he resumed it was in a low, almost warning tone.

"I need hardly tell you, Captain, that the absence of the Federation representative at the conference would be tantamount to an expression of disinterest on our part, if not an outright insult. Nothing could be better calculated to drive the Briamosites into the orbit of the Klingon Empire than for the *Enterprise* to arrive after the conference is scheduled to begin."

Kirk bridled at being so openly chided, but held his silence.

"You will proceed to Briamos by way of Starbase Twenty-Five. There you will receive additional briefings and more detailed information on what you can expect upon arriving at Briamos. You should have ample time to attend all the scheduled briefings and still reach Briamos well before the conference begins." The ambassador thought for a moment, glanced briefly over at the commodore, then said almost absently to the pickup at his end, "That's all, then, Captain Kirk. We of the Diplomatic Corps are with you in spirit if not in the flesh."

The picture faded. As it did so, Kirk thought he detected the barest hint of a reassuring grin on Commodore Musashi's face. It was a smile that said, Don't-mind-the-ambassador-he's-upset-because-he-can't-be-there-for-his-moment-of-glory-so-just-ignore-him-and-do-your-job.

"End transmission, Captain," Uhura announced formally as the last vestiges of image faded from the screen.

Kirk considered all he had just seen and heard, then swiveled to regard his first officer. "Well, Mr. Spock, I'd just as soon *not* engage in any professional word fighting, but we don't seem to have any choice. We're prisoners of our spatial position. At least we'll get to meet the Briamosites. They sound like an interesting people. I only wish we didn't have to be civil to a bunch of Klingons at the same time."

"I also have been intrigued by the little I have heard of Briamos and its inhabitants, Captain," replied Spock. "I am looking forward to the starbase sessions we will be attending."

Kirk nodded in reply, turned to face the helm, "Mr. Sulu, set a course for Starbase Twenty-Five."

"Yes, sir," Sulu responded, turning to his console.

"Standard cruising speed, Mr. Sulu." Kirk hesitated, then asked, "By the way, do we have coordinates for Briamos? In the event we run into trouble, we might have to bypass the starbase and proceed directly to Briamos."

Sulu made a rapid check of the navigation computer. "Coordinates for Briamos were entered last input session, sir. If we have to, we can get there from here."

Kirk relaxed a little at that information.

"Anticipating difficulties, sir?" Lieutenant Arex inquired from his position at the navigation station.

"Lieutenant, given the importance of this conference to both the Federation and Klingon, I'd be surprised if we *didn't* run into a little interference."

"Yes, sir," the Edoan acknowledged in his quiet way. "Dense of me not to see that, sir."

"Excuse me, Captain."

Kirk frowned slightly, glanced over a shoulder toward communications.

"What is it, Lieutenant Uhura?"

"Sir, I have"—she sounded a bit uncertain, which was unusual in itself—"another priority message coming in."

It was Spock who voiced the most obvious objection. "Are you certain it's not a ghost of the first message, Lieutenant?"

Uhura was rapidly checking several readouts. "No sir, absolutely not. I haven't quite traced the place of origin, but it's definitely not coming from Starfleet coordinates."

There was silence on the bridge while Uhura fought with abstract math. As usual, she won. "The signal is very weak, Captain." Again delicate hands moved in an attempt to coax the incoming message to greater clarity. "Odd." She was staring at a single readout now. "According to my instrumentation the signal is emanating from a system known as Gruyakin."

"Mr. Spock?" But Kirk needn't have urged his first officer, who was already reading the requisite information from the

science computer screen.

"The Gruyakin system consists of twelve planets circling a K-6 star, Captain," he reported. "Two of the dozen worlds are reported to be marginally habitable, but there are no settlements of any kind. The only item of interest stems from reports of a vanished civilization on one of the two inhabitable worlds."

"Then who," Kirk wondered aloud, "is broadcasting a message strong enough to reach this far?"

"I don't know, sir, but I have an acceptable signal now."

"Let's see it then, Lieutenant." Kirk turned his attention once again to the main screen.

Despite Uhura's best efforts and some heroic image enhancing by the communication computers, the picture that appeared there was fuzzy and distorted. But amid the interference everyone could make out a tired and none-too-clean, middle-aged human woman. They could also discern a few details, including prematurely gray hair, deep-set blue eyes, and an expression awash with worry and grave concern.

"Does anybody . . ." she said, obviously in the middle of repeating a by-now-old message. Abruptly she noticed an unseen control on her left and looked into her own pickup out onto the bridge of the *Enterprise*. Kirk wondered if her view of him was as weak as his own was of her.

"Sorry if we've startled you," he said, "but you were broadcasting on a priority Starfleet frequency."

"I know what we're doing!" she replied, a mite testily. Then it was her turn to apologize as she ran a hand over her forehead to brush aside several trailing hairs. "Excuse me, whoever you are. We've all been under a lot of pressure here. We still are.

"My name is Shannon Masid. I'm in charge of this expedition to Gruyakin Six." She used a thumb to gesture sharply over one coverall-clad shoulder.

"One of the two inhabitable worlds in the Gruyakin system, Captain," Spock whispered to him.

Despite the poor quality of the transmission, Kirk could just make out the curving wall of a transparent dome behind the woman and a very little bit of the landscape beyond. A few

hardy, thin plants showed against the dome, as tired and beaten as the topography they grew upon. A lake so dull and black it might have been the source of the Styx lay in the distance.

"What expedition is that?" Kirk wanted to know. "According to our information there are no outposts in the Gruyakin system."

"Not so fast, sir. Who might you be?"

Kirk was a little peeved at what sounded almost like an accusation. This was evident in his reply, which was a touch sharper than he meant it to be. "I'm Captain James T. Kirk, commanding the U.S.S. *Enterprise*, en route to Starbase Twenty-Five."

"*Enterprise* . . . Starbase Twenty-Five." The woman appeared relieved, then said importantly. "Captain, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to alter your course."

"Alter our—?" Kirk was speechless.

"I am sure Ms. Masid has a reason, sir," Spock said gently.

"I'm sure she does, Mr. Spock," Kirk replied firmly, "and I'm sure it's valid—to her." He directed his voice to the command-chair pickup.

"Ms. Masid, the *Enterprise* is on a mission of vital importance to the Federation. I can't imagine any circumstances under which we could alter our course. If you're in some difficulty, please explain its nature and we'll see that relief is sent to you promptly. But I'm afraid we cannot—"

"How do I know you're who and what you say you are?"

For a second Kirk's outrage threatened to overpower his reason. Then he considered the suspicion and fear in the woman's tone. His exasperation gave way to curiosity. This Masid did not look or sound like a fool. Then it came to him, something he had noticed as soon as she'd appeared on the screen but had only placed just now.

She wasn't just frightened. She was terrified. That had not been immediately obvious because she was fighting to keep her emotions under control.

"How do I know," she continued anxiously, "that you're not in some kind of disguise, that your appearance isn't meant to fool us?"

"Mr. Spock, play the visual pickup around the bridge," Kirk directed.

Spock did so, and the woman's darting eyes on the screen showed that she was following everything intently.

"Satisfied?" Kirk asked when the pickup had completed a circuit of the bridge.

"Almost. If this is a ruse, it's an elaborate one. Just one question," she went on rapidly. "Who won the Federation tridimensional hockey championship three years ago in the double-overtime final game, and who was named most valuable player?"

"Really, Ms. Masid!"

"I'm dead serious, Captain," she replied. "That information isn't likely to be in an enemy's computer banks."

"Her seriousness appears genuine, Captain." Spock was convinced of the woman's sincerity. "If you'll wait a moment I'll check the computer files in the recreation section and—"

Sulu interrupted him as he prepared to recover the necessary information.

"That's not necessary, Mr. Spock." The helmsman put himself on the pickup. "The Eridani Gryfalcons," he said. "Most valuable player was center-forward-up Shawn Ge-Yrmis."

"Thank you, whoever you are. That's right." The woman on the screen smiled gratefully. Sulu glanced at the science station, and Spock nodded approvingly in return.

"That's as conclusive a test as I can think of," the figure on the screen declared. She folded her hands on the battered worktable before her. "I've got to accept that you're who you say you are.

"Our expedition isn't large or permanent enough to qualify for outpost status," she explained. "That's why we're not listed in your computer. I'm in charge of Federation Archeological Expedition Four-Six-Two, investigating the remnants of a dead civilization on Gruyakin's sixth planet."

"That matches the information we have, Captain," Spock declared.

"The civilization of this world," and she gestured again at the desolate, unimpressive landscape barely visible through the dome behind her, "was not particularly important, nor does it seem to us to have been especially impressive. Nevertheless, it was a civilization and all such are deemed worthy of study and investigation."

"I'm familiar with the motives of the Federation Science League," Kirk commented drily. "You still haven't explained your reason for utilizing a priority distress frequency."

"We've found something here which *is* impressive, Captain. It's the reason for our signal, for my unfriendly attitude, and for my caution in dealing with you. We couldn't risk having an unfriendly power learn what we've unearthed here. Captain, we've found a sealed Slaver stasis box."

Silence on the bridge.

Kirk turned to his first officer. "Mr. Spock, what are the odds of finding a Slaver stasis box on . . ." He stopped, waved diffidently. "No, never mind. All that matters is that such a box exists."

"We've been broadcasting our priority call ever since we found the box, Captain." The reasons for the archeologist's tenseness became clear. "Going on two weeks now. We haven't much of a transmitter here. Your ship is the first that's passed within hailing distance." She smiled slightly again. "This isn't a heavily funded expedition. As I said, Gruyakin's not thought to be very important.

"You see now, Captain Kirk, why you must change course. As far from developed Federation worlds as we are, I've been frightened that some unfriendly power or unprincipled group of humans might stumble on our discovery. A sealed Slaver stasis box, of course, is beyond price."

"I understand now, Ms. Masid." Kirk regarded her sympathetically. "You were right to be so cautious. The temptation would be enormous even for an honest man. We'll be there as soon as possible and we'll relieve you of that box."

"Thank you." She was so obviously happy that it was embarrassing. "I can handle responsibility, but this is a bit too

much for me, Captain. We'll be anxiously awaiting your arrival here."

"Your pardon, Captain," Spock began urgently, but Kirk hushed him.

"I'll be glad to see the damn thing gone," Shannon Masid was saying. "So we can all get back to some simple, uncomplicated excavating. We'll have our beacon set to provide you with beam-down or landing coordinates. Gruyakin Six out . . ."

"Captain, you cannot afford to miss the orientation sessions at Starbase Twenty-Five and still expect to make credible and accurate ambassadorial decisions." Spock regarded the captain expectantly. The hoped-for suggestion was not long in coming.

"No, I can't, Mr. Spock. But *you* can."

"That was my thought as well, Captain."

Kirk completed a mental outline. "You, Lieutenant Uhura, and Lieutanant Sulu will travel via shuttlecraft to Gruyakin Six and take custody of the stasis box. While you are doing that, I'll be undergoing briefing sessions on Briamos at Starbase Twenty-Five. We'll depart from Briamos upon completion of those sessions or immediately on your arrival from Gruyakin, whichever falls nearest to the time set for the beginning of the conference." He paused thoughtfully, added, "I'd rather have you undergo those same sessions, Mr. Spock, but I'm confident that as long as one of us attends them, he can fill in the other on Briamosite protocol and such with the aid of tapes."

"I believe I can cope with the material sufficiently, prior to our arrival at Briamos, Captain."

Kirk smiled imperceptibly. "I'm sure you can, Spock." The smile vanished. "I wouldn't consider sending you three," and he gazed in turn at each of the three designated officers, "prior to so vital a conference if an unopened stasis box wasn't of nearly equal importance."

"Captain?"

"Yes, Spock?"

"Rather than have Lieutenant Commander Scott substitute in my place, Captain, and have someone take over in turn for

him, I request permission to have Lieutenant Vedama of Sciences handle my duties in my temporary absence. I'll have little time to brief him, but he's a highly competent officer who deserves the opportunity to gain some experience in a command position. He has served as chief science officer on smaller Star-fleet vessels. For him to take over for me on short notice, even for a week or so, will be excellent training."

Kirk nodded approvingly. It was like Spock to have the interests of a younger officer in mind even as he was about to embark on a serious mission of his own.

"I haven't heard anyone speak ill of the officer you mention, Mr. Spock. Request approved. You'll detail the lieutenant personally before you depart."

"Of course, Captain."

Rising from the command chair, Kirk met with the three department officers near the turbolift doors. "You'll leave as soon as possible. If you reach Gruyakin and have even a suspicion that another vessel might be in your spatial vicinity, get in touch with us immediately."

"What could you do in such a situation, Captain?" Spock wanted to know. "You still cannot deviate from your appointment with the briefers at Starbase Twenty-Five."

"One crisis at a time, Mr. Spock." He went on more seriously. "I really don't know. Much would depend on our exact position relative to Gruyakin and the base, and the position of the other ship, its markings, and so on. The difficulty stems from the fact that the contents of a Slaver box might be worth more than an alliance with Briamos, or they might be worthless. Let's hope no such problems arise. Just pick up the box and get out of the Gruyakin system as fast as you're able."

All three officers acknowledged the captain's orders, then hurried to their cabins. Only the minimum of personal effects would be taken. A shuttlecraft had very little spare room. But they wouldn't be gone very long and nothing beyond the basics was required.

Not long after leaving the bridge, they were clustered in the shuttlecraft bay. Engineer Scott was waiting to greet them,

having just finished a personal checkout of the little shuttlecraft *Copernicus*.

"Have a nice trip, Mr. Spock, Sulu, Uhura," he said. "Bring back lots of pictures."

"From what I've seen of Gruyakin Six, Mr. Scott," Spock replied perfectly deadpan, "visual mementos would not be of much interest. However, I'm certain you'll find what we're going after of considerably more interest."

"And what might that be? I was only told to make the shuttle ready for a fast flight."

"Everything's been happening all at once, Mr. Scott," Sulu explained. "An archeological expedition on Gruyakin Six has found a Slaver stasis box."

"A Slaver—" Scott let out a long whistle, looked impressed. "No wonder the captain's in such a hurry. Why isna the ship goin'?"

"The *Enterprise* must reach Starbase Twenty-Five by a certain date, Mr. Scott." Spock was making his own, inevitable fast inspection of the shuttle. "Sending out a shuttle to Gruyakin is the only way everything can be properly accomplished in the time remaining to us. The sooner the stasis box is aboard the *Enterprise*, the better it will be for the Federation."

"Aye, Mr. Spock. Here to Gruyakin to Starbase Twenty-Five. I dinna think I'd care to be makin' that trip myself."

"I share your concern, but we have, as I've explained, no choice."

Scott gestured at the shuttle. "Well, there's no need to worry about the *Copernicus*. I've triple-checked everything myself and you've got long-range supplies bulging every storage locker. If you have to stay out longer than you plan, you're equipped for it."

"I hope not." Uhura looked anxious. "I'm curious to see what these controversial Briamosites are like. I've never heard of Starfleet speaking so highly of a new civilization or potential new ally. They must be something special."

"They can hardly be more special than a sealed stasis box," said Sulu fervently. "I've heard about them all my life, read

about them on tapes, seen pictures of them, but I never expected to see one in person."

"In appearance," Spock commented as they entered the shuttle, "a stasis box is not particularly impressive. The knowledge of what lies inside more than makes up for any abstract esthetic deficiencies, however." He turned in the doorway, looked back out into the shuttle bay.

"Good-bye, Mr. Scott. We'll be seeing you again very soon."

Scott waited until the shuttle door had sealed itself, murmured a heartfelt, "Amen to that, Mr. Spock." Then he jogged to the near wall and punched an intercom switch.

"Attention, attention! Chief Engineer Scott speaking. All personnel are directed to clear the shuttlecraft bay. Clear the shuttle bay for launch." He thumbed another switch, was rewarded by the clamor of the bay alarm, then hit the communications nub once more.

"Bridge . . . Shuttle bay."

"Kirk here. That you, Scotty?"

"Aye, Captain. Clearing the bay. I'll be out myself in a second."

"Thanks, Scotty. We'll take it from here. Bridge out." He turned to the communications station, now manned by Lieutenant M'ress. "Communications check, *Copernicus*, Lieutenant."

"Checking, sirr," The Caitian officer purred back at him as she studied her console. "Channel open."

Kirk spoke into his chair pickup. "Mr. Spock, this is the captain speaking."

"Communications check good, Captain," came the clear reply. "All shuttle systems check out normal. Ready for departure."

"Stand by." Kirk turned to face the slight, nut-brown little man seated at the science station. "Open the shuttle-bay doors, Lieutenant, Vedama."

"Opening shuttle-bay doors, sir." The science officer's voice was almost as gentle as Lieutenant Arex's, but clipped at the end of heavily consonanted words. Vedama's ancestors had fought for a subsistence existence outside a bloated city on

Earth named Bombay. Now the great-great-grandson of those struggling peasants commanded more knowledge at his fingertips than had all his ancestors combined.

At the stern of the *Enterprise* vast metal panels slid ponderously aside. There was no one in the chamber, now open to space, to see the few wisps of unreclaimed atmosphere puff out into emptiness. Several lights flashed on and then off, were matched by smaller telltales on the ship's bridge.

"Shuttlecraft away, Captain," Vedama reported.

"Close bay doors."

"Closing doors, sir."

Kirk turned his attention to the main viewscreen. "Lieutenant M'ress, give me shuttle channel and the view from aft scanners." M'ress, nudged certain controls and a picture of the *Copernicus*, floating behind the *Enterprise*, appeared on the screen.

"Mr. Spock?"

"All shuttle systems continue to function normally, Captain," came the instant reply. "Preparing course to Gruyakin."

"Mr. Spock," Kirk continued more softly, "I meant what I said earlier. If you encounter another ship in the Gruyakin system, notify me immediately. Don't try to save time by coping with an intruder yourselves. You're not equipped for it."

"I understand, Captain. Hopefully we will see nothing but subsolar shuttles at our destination. We will rendezvous with the *Enterprise* at Starbase Twenty-Five at the appropriate time. *Copernicus* out."

"*Enterprise* . . . out." Reluctantly, convinced he had forgotten something, Kirk switched off.

After a while he considered beaming the shuttle again, but he had really nothing more to add. Spock was not the reckless type, but—Then it struck him what was actually bothering him. He wanted to be on board the *Copernicus*, racing to Gruyakin. Not on his way to sit like a schoolboy again before a set of repetitive lectures.

There were no such things as adults, he mused idly. Only older children . . .

III

From the time it left the *Enterprise*, the *Copernicus* was traveling at maximum shuttle speed. Spock intended to retrieve the Slaver stasis box as fast as possible, both to insure its safety and to make sure that they would reach Starbase Twenty-Five in time for them to sit in on the last of the Briamos briefings. Consequently, it wasn't too long before they had entered the Gruyakin system and taken up orbit around its sixth planet.

That world was no more impressive from orbit than it had been when seen on the main screen of the *Enterprise*. It was clearly a tired, worn globe, an old world with no high mountain ranges and only shallow oceans. Yet at one time in the distant past it had been home to a hopeful civilization. Perhaps the people of Gruyakin had also yearned to reach the stars, only to fall back in failure. Galactic archeology had long ago proven one thing: Those races who reached the stars expanded, advanced, and grew. Those who did not often fell to squabbling among themselves over petty tribal differences, only to disappear long before their natural time. The same thing might have happened to Vulcan. It had come very near to happening on Earth.

Yet down there among the dead cities and forgotten memories lay one of the most valuable single objects in the galaxy, a Slaver stasis box. How and why it had come to be in this unimportant place was a question the archeological expedition might answer in the future. For now, it was important to place that box and its as-yet-unknown contents under more protection than a group of scientists and researchers could offer.

"I've located their beacon, Mr. Spock." Uhura glanced up from the *Copernicus*'s modest console.

"Homing in," reported Sulu, as he angled the shuttlecraft in the direction provided by the beacon.

Uhura made adjustments to another section of the console, then announced with satisfaction: "Audio contact."

"Identify yourselves," a strident voice demanded in the small cabin of the shuttle. "Our main phaser batteries are trained on you! Identify yourselves."

Sulu chuckled, but Spock spoke normally into the pickup. "You can drop the subterfuge, Gruyakin Six. This is the shuttlecraft *Copernicus* from the U.S.S. *Enterprise*, here to pick up . . . cargo. Commander Spock speaking. Is that you, Director Masid?"

An audible sigh reached them over the speaker. "Yes, it is, Commander. Excuse our bluff. It's not much, but it's the best we could think of." A pause, then: "We're mighty glad you're here. The *Enterprise* isn't with you?"

"No. This is the only way we could satisfy two vital commitments within a limited time."

"What difference does it make?" Uhura looked askance at Sulu, who shrugged.

"You have our beacon?" the director asked.

"Yes. With your permission, we will land immediately."

"The sooner the better. Gruyakin out."

Spock thought to ask a question, but decided not to call back. They would be down on the surface soon enough and he could ask it in person. He was feeling some of the same concern as Uhura. There was something going on down on the blighted surface of this world . . .

It wasn't often Sulu had the chance to pilot a shuttlecraft, much less to make a planetary landing. The transporter was a far simpler and faster device. But one couldn't have told this from the smoothness of their touchdown, which was a silent, safe tribute to the lieutenant's training and natural ability.

He brought the shuttle to a halt alongside the dark lake they had first observed during the initial transmission from Gruyakin to the *Enterprise*. Black volcanic sand along the narrow beach extended out indefinitely into the water and explained the lake's grim coloration. Ruined buildings, testaments to a forgotten alien architecture, lined the far shore of the lake.

Immediately to their left and slightly farther from the shoreline shone the familiar bubbles of pressurized domes. In the bleak setting they provided a comforting, if spartan, reminder of civilization. The expedition's quarters were far from luxurious. Love of science and the quest for knowledge could often enable people to endure hardships no sensible person would otherwise willingly submit to.

"Peculiar," commented Spock as he regarded the horizon near the domes. "They knew we were coming right down. I'd think there'd be someone here to meet us."

Sulu frowned as he studied the terrain. "Not a pretty world." He checked instruments, gazed at readouts. "Atmosphere is breathable, which is to be expected, but thin. Altitude equivalent of roughly three thousand meters on Earth. That might explain why no one's running to greet us." He peered closer at an isolated dial. "Judging from the content of certain trace gases, I don't think this world's going to smell very good, either."

Uhura squinted and then raised a hand to point. "Here they come. There's a vehicle of some kind."

A small, oval-bodied crawler was speeding toward them from the general region of the domes.

"Driver's a little reckless," Uhura observed disapprovingly.

Covering the intervening ground at high speed, the vehicle whined to a stop before the shuttle as Sulu let down the ramp. The atmosphere which now filled the shuttle had a faint flavor of overripe vegetation tinged with sulfur. Sulu tried not to look pained as they moved to meet their greeters.

Spock recognized the woman getting out of the far side of the crawler as expedition director Masid. Two men followed her toward the shuttle.

"They appear worried," he said speculatively. "I'd have thought they would be relieved by our arrival. I'm anxious to learn why they're not."

Uhura's nose twisted as they started down the ramp. "Phew! I think I'd wear a life-support belt here, even if the air is considered fit for breathing."

"An injudicious waste of energy, Lieutenant," Spock chided her as they walked toward the approaching threesome. His

own nostrils twitched as a particularly noxious odor brushed them. He had to confess privately that Uhura's idea was not without merit.

Masid noted his insignia, went straight up to him and extended a hand. "Commander Spock." Her grip was surprisingly firm.

"Director Masid." He took in the expressions of the two men who were accompanying her. All three humans wore expressions akin to those who had recently placed large bets on a sure thing, only to learn that it wasn't so sure and that they had three minutes to withdraw their bets.

More significantly, the taller of the two men had a recent phaser burn scarring the left side of his neck.

"You've had trouble," Spock said. It was not exactly a question.

The director was panting heavily, fighting for air and not because of Gruyakin Six's thinner atmosphere. It was clear she had been running hard. "It's the box," she said reluctantly. "It's been stolen."

"Stolen!" Sulu couldn't believe it. "Didn't you have it under guard? Something that valuable—"

"Please, Mr. . . .?"

"Lieutenant Sulu," he replied.

"Lieutenant," she explained wearily, "try to understand my situation here. This is purely a scientific expedition. I'd thought that I could believe the psychological profiles in our records. Those profiles were accurate save for one man. Even given the possibility that one of my people might conceivably be tempted by the wealth the box could represent, I thought that our isolation here, with no way for anyone to get off-planet until the relief ship arrives, would prevent any criminal action toward the stasis box. Well, I was wrong. The psychologists were wrong."

"You had best fill us in on exactly what has taken place," Spock suggested gently.

"The man's name is Jaiao," she began tiredly. "One of our excavators. Just because he's not as bright as some of our scientists was no reason to suspect him of harboring dishonest thoughts. Jaiao's difficulty is not unique. He simply

feels he's not as wealthy as he would like to be." Her face twisted into a sardonic grin. "That's the problem."

"He stole the box by himself, then?" inquired Spock. "He is acting alone?"

"As far as we can tell." Masid gestured toward the distant domes. "Leastwise, no one's rushed to help him so far."

The criminal bent of certain humans never ceased to perplex Spock, and the present situation appeared founded on less logic than most such incidents.

Masid shook her head. "Be stunned if I know what came over him." Again she gestured at the domes, taking care to indicate the bulge farthest from their right "He's locked himself in a storage dome."

"Have you tried to reason with him?"

She eyed the first officer strangely. "For some five minutes, until it became clear the devil himself couldn't talk him out of his foolishness. We also tried exhausting the air in the dome, but he has a life-support belt and plenty of power packs for it, so *that* didn't work."

"What can he do against you, to keep you from simply rushing him?" Sulu asked.

"He has a weapon in there, a model 6BB displacer. That's one of the portable tools we use for excavating the ruins. It's clumsy compared to a hand phaser, but in the hands of someone like Jaiao, who knows how to use it, it makes a pretty nasty weapon, as Charlie here can tell you."

The man with the ugly burn mark on his neck nodded. "He's not fooling with that thing. He didn't miss me by much—and I don't think he was trying to miss me at all."

"If you tried exhausting the air in his dome, he'd just cut his way out into thinner but still livable atmosphere," Sulu pointed out. "You must have *some* weapons, or at least other displacers and people who know how to run them. How many of you are there here at the station?"

"I know what you're thinking, Lieutenant." Masid nodded. "It won't work. I didn't mean to imply that Jaiao is stupid. He's not, he's just not as brilliant as some of our higher-ranking professionals here. But he knew what he was doing before he took the box, had his strategy pretty well planned

out. He went straight for the storage dome, with its ample supply of water, power, and food.

"If we rush him," she finished somberly, "he's threatened to use the displacer to try and open the stasis box."

"If we could be certain there was nothing in the box for its mechanism to protect . . ."

"Oh, it's sealed all right, Commander," she told him.

"Isn't there some way we can neutralize the field without him knowing about it, Mr. Spock?" The helmsman looked hopefully at his superior.

"I fear not, Mr. Sulu. An unopened, sealed box maintains its stasis field by means we still do not understand. Inside that field, time stands still, perfectly preserving whatever its original owners wished to put inside.

"There are methods of safely opening a stasis box. It has been done a number of times. But if the opening is not carried out with the utmost care and proper instrumentation, the results can be disastrous. I personally know of one stasis box that was opened hastily and improperly. It contained a variety of disruptor bomb. It may also have contained many other things, but we will never know of them. When the box was tampered with in that sloppy fashion, the bomb went off.

"I have heard of other means, equally lethal, which the Slavers employed to assure the security of their boxes. This person's threat to open this one in a hasty, crude fashion is a very real threat to anyone nearby."

"Sorry. I apologize, Director Masid." Sulu looked contrite. "I should have guessed you had reasons for not having made a direct attack on him already."

She smiled back at him. "We're researchers here, not members of the military. We don't know how to proceed or what to do next. We do have one shuttlecraft, located far on the other side of the domes, for emergency use. Our main relief ship isn't due for another three months. There are several inhabited systems within the range of our own shuttle."

"I can imagine what he is demanding," said Spock knowledgeably.

She nodded, once. "Free access to the shuttle and a guarantee of noninterference until he reaches it. He won't get that from *me*. We'd sooner have him break the box seal and destroy the whole base rather than let him slip away to maybe sell the box to someone with belligerent intentions." There were murmurs of agreement from the two men flanking her.

"Of course," Spock pointed out, "the box may not contain anything that might be of use to such people. Neither weapon nor weapon-adaptable device."

"But we can't take that chance . . . of course." Masid eyed Spock approvingly. "We think alike, Commander."

"I will accept that to a certain point," Spock agreed cautiously. "I still believe our best attempt to, ah, defuse the situation is to reason with the man."

"It's hard to reason with someone who has most of his sense in his back, Commander," declared Masid firmly. "Maybe you can do better than we have, but I doubt it." She eyed him with suspicion.

"We must at least give the appearance of negotiating in good faith." Spock looked thoughtful as he glanced toward the domes. "I want to see what the physical situation is, before deciding how to proceed. In order to do that we must convince him to talk with us."

"All right," agreed the director. "The fact that you're Federation military might have some effect on him. I'm afraid he's convinced himself that he's gone too far to back out now."

"I don't think so," Uhura disagreed. "So far he's guilty of nothing worse than simple theft."

"And assault with intent to kill." That came from the unforgiving-sounding man on Masid's left, the one with the burn from the displacer.

"Perhaps he will talk to *you*." Masid appeared ready to half persuade herself that something might be done before someone was killed. "Just remember that Jaiao has visions of endless wealth running through his head and he figures this is his one chance in life to get it."

"All I require is that you tell him who we are and aid us in getting to talk with him." Spock started toward the car. "The

sooner we begin, the better it will be. We are on a tight schedule ourselves."

The cargo compartment of the battered little land vehicle was spacious enough to hold them all without crowding, if not in comfort. Once inside, Masid piloted the vehicle over a circuitous course across the surprisingly rugged terrain. Lava had flowed here in the recent past and there were cracks and rills to be avoided.

On the way they passed other members of the expedition. All of them worked hard at being interested in their assigned duties, but they glanced furtively and often in the direction of the car and the new arrivals within. Sulu noticed several of the anxious faces. He couldn't blame them. If the undoubtedly nervous man in the storage dome tried to force open the stasis box, everyone nearby might instantly vanish from existence.

The lock leading into the domes was simple in design and fragile in execution, and heavy-duty seals weren't necessary. The lock was present for convenience only, to permit the expedition to maintain the slight comfort of normal atmosphere within its living quarters. On dour Gruyakin, even the slightest luxury was worth a little extra expense, the helmsman mused.

Inside, they followed a corridor to where a man and woman were crouching behind a tripod-mounted device of metal and plastic. Spock recognized it as a displacer of a type similar to the one Director Masid had already indicated was in the hands of the thief. Such a device was designed to move modest quantities of earth and stone with fair precision. His own small hand phaser contained more destructive power. The displacer could still neatly remove a man's head from his body, however.

As they approached, the woman rose, eyed the three officers speculatively, and addressed the expedition head. "He's still holed up in there, Director. He's been very quiet."

"Asleep?" Spock queried.

She looked up at him. "No. We heard some crates being opened. He's using the time to build up his easily accessible supplies, I think."

"We thought of that too, Commander," Masid said regretfully. "I told you Jaiao had this planned out. He says he's set up an alarm system to warn him if anyone gets within three meters of him. That's not much warning, but I don't want to risk the lives of any of my people finding out how fast his reaction time is. Anyhow, we can't tell when he's sleeping and when he's not. He blew out the visual monitors in the dome's roof, and he stays out of sight."

"Sounds like he's ready to settle down for a long stay," observed Sulu as he moved forward.

Masid took a couple of quick steps, cut him off. "Take it a little slower here, please, Lieutenant. Jaiao's shown a tendency to be a bit trigger-happy." She gestured upward and they saw the dark streaks on the tough dome material where blasts from the displacer had struck.

Keeping close to the near wall, they moved cautiously toward the storage dome. They reached a place where the corridor opened into a two-story-high single large chamber. In places, it was stacked almost to that curved ceiling with tubes, cylinders, and crates of all sizes and colors.

Sulu was in the lead and cautiously peeked around the last bend in the corridor. "I can't see him," he whispered back to the others.

"A little to the left of room center," Masid advised him. "He's built himself a nice little barricade with a couple of big gas tanks in front."

Sulu shifted his gaze slightly, located the bulky metal cylinders. "Still can't see him . . . He's well hidden, all right." The helmsman kept an eye on the disconcerting arrangement of containers. One of the brightly colored shapes moved slightly. "I see him now. He's staying down low, Mr. Spock. I don't think we could get a phaser on him clean."

"What about reflective surfaces, Mr. Sulu?"

The helmsman stared long at the makeshift fortress in the center of the room. "No good, sir. Everything that's piled close to him is plastic, ceramic, or some other dulled material. Nothing polished enough to risk bouncing a beam off."

"I didn't think of that." Masid looked impressed. "But don't attribute it to Jaiao's intelligence. I don't think he's *that* smart.

We just don't have much stored in metal or glass cases, that's all."

Spock started forward. "Let me have a look, Mr. Sulu."

The lieutenant hugged the wall as he edged back into the corridor, trading places with the first officer. Spock peered around the corner, immediately located the thief's makeshift ramparts.

"What is his last name, please?" he asked.

"Beguin," Masid told him.

Spock nodded, turned, and leaned as far into the room as he dared.

"Jaiao Beguin," he called sharply. No answer. He tried again. *"Jaiao Beguin!"*

A rustling sound reached them from the jumble of crates and cylinders, though no face appeared among them. "You know what I want! I'm getting impatient!" The voice was high-pitched, angry.

Sulu leaned over, whispered to Uhura. "Not even Mr. Spock's going to be able to reason with this one. The director's right: He's a little crazy."

Ignoring the byplay behind him, the first officer of the *Enterprise* concentrated on analyzing the reply to his call, dissecting every nuance, building a temporary psychological profile of the speaker out of a couple of short, terse statements.

"This is Commander Spock of the Federation cruiser *Enterprise*. I am in command of a landing party from that ship. We are here to recover the Slaver stasis box, which is valuable property belonging to the Federation government and all its peoples.

"At this very moment, heavy phasers are trained on you both from my position and from outside this dome. You cannot escape. We can kill you if we have to, instantly, before you can damage the box—and the box and its contents will not be affected.

"Thus far you can only be charged with simple theft and assault. If you turn over the box and surrender, it will go much easier on you."

The reply to Spock's carefully worded combination of promise and threat was a peal of barking, none-too-stable laughter that bordered on the hysterical. "I don't believe you!" it declared imperiously. "If you could kill me and not damage the box you would have done so already, without giving me any warning. Who do you think you're fooling with?"

Spock could have answered the man's question, but it would do no good to antagonize him further. Besides, Spock hadn't expected the man to give in readily.

"Didn't you hear our shuttle land?" he called.

"Yeah, I heard it," Beguin admitted, his voice a bit softer and more speculative now. "You could have a cannon trained on my forehead for all I care. I've got the box right in front of me, between my legs. It's sitting on the workplate of a compacter. You know what that means?"

Masid looked startled, and whispered to Sulu and Uhura. "Our compacter is a device for crushing rocks and other material for detailed analysis of their constituent parts. It's got an idle control. If it's running and he trips the trigger for fast release, it'll throw about a thousand kilos of pressure onto the stasis box!"

Sulu looked worried. "Is that enough to crack the box, Mr. Spock?"

"It is possible," the first officer finally replied after considering the problem thoroughly, "depending on the strength of the field inside the box and how much of it shields the box material itself. I would prefer not to risk it."

The nervous, taunting voice of the thief interrupted them. "Go ahead and shoot, why don't you, Mr. Spock of the *Enterprise*? Why don't you shoot? You might kill me before the auto-release I've set on the compacter can trigger it . . . but I don't think so. In any case, I'm betting my life that you're not willing to take that gamble. I'm going to bet that you're not going to risk the lives of all the people in this station, including your own."

"You are quite correct," Spock shouted back at him, "but neither can you escape with the box. It is a stalemated situation you cannot win."

"I don't see why not." Bravado mixed with assurance in the man's voice. "I've planned this pretty careful. You can't do anything to me without having me throw the compacter pressure onto the box. And while you sit and make up your minds I can get along nice, thanks."

"What about sleep?" Spock countered. "All the food and water in the world won't help you when you need rest, nor will your imaginary warning device if we rush you from several sides simultaneously."

"I figure with the stimulants I've found," Beguin responded, "I can stay awake operating efficiently for another forty hours or so. But you're right, Commander Spock. You could make trouble for me if I fell asleep. So this is what we're going to do: If I don't hear something positive about my request for the shuttle in forty hours, and I find myself falling asleep, I'll just have to assume you've all outsmarted me. That'll mean all my work's been for nothing, won't it? I'll be very discouraged and depressed. I think," he concluded, his voice rising slightly, "that in that event I'll just let the compacter go on the box anyway, to see what happens."

Spock and the others ignored the laughter drifting out of the room. "We now know how much time we have left to work in."

"What happens if the forty hours are up and we haven't figured out how to pry him loose from that box?" Uhura stared straight at Spock.

"We will deal with that eventuality in thirty-nine hours, Lieutenant," Spock informed her crisply.

"He's got it all planned out, all right," she observed. "He's smarter than I thought."

"There is a difference, Lieutenant, between true intelligence and animal cunning. The latter is the virtue our opponent possesses and it is that we must cope with."

"Whatever, it's *working* for him," she argued.

"True enough." Spock turned his gaze to the attentive director. "Are there any other entrances or exits to this storage dome?"

"No, none," Masid informed them.

Spock nodded knowingly. "Given the care with which this theft has been carried out thus far, I would not be surprised if that is yet another reason why he retreated here. Did you consider cutting another entrance?"

"We did," she confessed. "I decided there's no way we could do it without Beguin hearing or seeing us, or both, and the last thing I wanted to do was panic him."

"Quite right." Spock eyed his companions. "I have a thought . . . but I would prefer an idea with a better chance of success than I postulate for my own."

"What about inducing some kind of odorless, colorless gas into the dome's ventilation system?" Uhura proposed. "If it was seeped in gradually, it might knock him out before he knows what's happening."

"I would almost consider that, Lieutenant," Spock admitted, "save for one drawback. If he is staying as close to the compacter and the box as he insists he is, then I would be surprised if he is not keeping a hand close by the compacter trigger at all times. The danger of knocking him out without anyone else around is that his hand or body might fall on the compacter trigger." He glanced briefly back into the chamber.

"Somehow we must get someone close to him, so that he cannot possibly throw the compacter switch in a last futile, defiant gesture." He paused. "I see one possibility. There is a very large container just to the left and rear of his likely resting place." He glanced backward. "What does it contain, Director Masid?"

She crawled forward, peered around the corner. "I see the one you mean, Commander, but I don't know what's inside. I can't keep track of everything that comes in in the way of supplies. Just a minute."

She retreated, climbed to her feet, and disappeared down the corridor. Several minutes passed before she returned with a tall man in tow, the one with the scar on his neck.

"Charlie's our quartermaster. It's his bailiwick that Beguin appropriated. That's how he got that burn." She gestured to him and they both managed to glance into the room. "The big crate on Beguin's left, Charlie . . . what's in it?"

"Give me a second." The man leaned farther into the room, squinted at the container in question. Just as he ducked back into the corridor, a faint but lethal bolt from the displacer scored the floor where he had been a moment before.

"That's just to let you know that I'm still watching!" a loud voice warned them. "Lucky for you I'm not asleep, or the whole place would go up!"

Leaning back against the corridor wall, Sulu eyed the smoking trench in the floor respectfully.

"I do not think we can reason further with him," Spock announced.

"I knew that in the first place." Uhura sniffed at the odor of burnt duraplastic.

"Nevertheless, it had to be tried. One is always hopeful—"

Charlie cut him off. "I remember now. I wanted to be sure. The crate holds bulk food rations, Commander. Should be mostly small containers of raw proteins, natural sealed meats and stuff."

"Nothing that would make much noise if it fell within the crate?" Spock asked.

"No . . . I wouldn't think so."

Masid's gaze narrowed. "What are you planning, Commander?"

Spock gestured just behind them, at the couple manning the makeshift weapon. "You have other displacers besides that one?"

"Sure," she said quickly. "They're all out at the various sites we're working but—"

"How long to bring two of your best ones in and set them up near here?"

She still didn't quite believe what Spock was indirectly proposing. "Within an hour, I guess. But I thought we already ruled out any attempt at cutting through—"

"Not to cut," Spock corrected her, "to *dig*. We will position the displacers precisely and tunnel beneath the dome. The tunnel will come up under the box very slowly and quietly. We'll make a little natural background noise, but the ground

will muffle the sound of the displacer, which I understand is a relatively silent instrument when operated at low power."

"That's so," Masid admitted.

"Whoever goes through the tunnel can cut through the bottom of the container manually. A phaser set on low power should slice through the plastic container material quickly and with little noise. Then he can pass the contents of the container back through the tunnel. Simultaneously we will engage Mr. Beguin in conversation."

Masid gave him a very querulous look.

"I had not expected enthusiasm," Spock confessed. "It is far from an ideal plan. I am not pleased with it myself. But in the absence of any alternative . . ."

No one said anything for a long moment. Then the director nodded to Spock. "All right, Commander. This sort of work is more your job than mine. I don't like it, but we'll try anything."

The displacers were brought in. After careful calculating, they were set in place and turned on. Their efficient operators had muffled the already-quiet devices with insulating material and they dug in near silence. Nor was there any noticeable vibration.

Nonetheless, to be absolutely certain Beguin didn't grow suspicious—and to try to wear him down a little mentally—Masid and the three officers from the *Enterprise* took turns arguing, threatening and appealing to the barricaded thief. Helpfully, he argued back, seeming to enjoy their futile attempts to cajole him out of his hideaway. Occasionally he would fire a blast from his displacer in their direction, apparently for no other reason than because it kept him amused.

Spock had no illusions about what would happen when the drugs started to lose their effectiveness and Beguin found himself growing drowsy. His maniacal humor would fade concurrent with his alertness.

At the moment, the first officer was watching the dirt and rock emerge in buckets from the rapidly lengthening tunnel. It

would take longer this way, but a conveyer would be dangerously noisy.

Uhura studied a small diagram, drew some lines on it, and compared them with calculations scribbled in the diagram's margin. "They should be in position any minute now, Mr. Spock."

"Yes. I'll want both you and Mr. Sulu to cover the area as best you can with your phasers. Don't fire unless you're certain he's clear of the stasis box and the compacter. Don't worry about hitting me. I'll try to get him away from the compacter trigger, and then—"

"Excuse me, sir." Sulu took the liberty of interrupting his superior. "I think I ought to be the one to go."

"This was my idea, Lieutenant, and I'll be the one to take the necessary risks, since I'll be the one responsible for this attempt's success or failure."

"Exactly, sir," pressed Sulu urgently, "and that's the very reason I should be the one to go."

"Explain yourself, Lieutenant."

"Mr. Spock, you can hold this man's attention better than any of us. That's the really critical part of the operation: not charging him from behind but distracting him from the front. If we can do that effectively, then anyone can jump him."

"He's right, Mr. Spock," Uhura agreed.

The first officer considered the objection only briefly. "I do not like the proposal but I cannot counter your arguments. Very well, Lieutenant Sulu. You will be the one to attack from inside the crate. Take special care with your phaser setting when you get ready to cut through the container bottom. It is imperative Mr. Beguin not hear you. As time passes without our meeting his demands, he grows progressively more unstable."

"Don't worry, sir," Sulu assured him. "I've seen what his displacer can do. I don't want it pointed in my face when I come out of there . . ."

IV

The displacers finished their work quickly. After a final conference with his companions and a wish of "Good luck" from Uhura, Sulu found himself crawling on hands and knees through the smooth passageway. Half-fused earth slid by under his palms.

Small lights had been placed at regular intervals in the tunnel by the excavators, so he had no trouble seeing his path. Nor did he have to be told when he was nearing his destination, since the tunnel floor and ceiling turned sharply upward. The excavators had used their displacers to cut long notches in the floor there. Otherwise the intermittently slick surface would have offered poor purchase for ascending.

Aware that he was under the storage dome now and that the highly excitable Beguin was somewhere above and just to his right, Sulu continued with greater caution. He passed the last emplaced light, which threw just enough illumination for him to make out a dark mass ahead: the bottom of the crate.

Edging close to it, he removed his pre-set phaser and trained it on the dark, thick material. Silently, the low-power beam cut through the dull-surfaced substance. Sulu had to move slightly, hugging the wall of the tunnel, to avoid drops of liquid, hot plastic dripping out of the steadily widening hole.

When he had enlarged the gap enough for a man to fit through, he turned off the phaser and replaced it at his waist. All was silent above, save for distant voices. Spock and the others were doing their part, arguing with Beguin and keeping his attention focused elsewhere.

Carefully, Sulu edged upward, began the dangerous task of removing the smaller packages from within the crate. Working fast and efficiently, he soon emptied the crate of a substantial portion of its contents, sliding them down into the tunnel. Then, a short pull—and he was on his knees inside.

For the last time he rehearsed his next moves in his mind. First, he rechecked his position. Beguin ought to be off to his

right, through that wall of his crate container, there. Sulu shifted more containers, giving himself a clear path to the crate wall in the opposite direction from Beguin's position. Then he activated his phaser again.

Gently Sulu applied the soft, short beam to one of the crate walls, near the top. Once more the preformed material softened, ran down into the crate. Fortunately, the plastic melted without an odor, as Spock and Masid had assured him it would. He reminded himself that there was no reason for Beguin to go for a stroll and every reason for him not to, but he still worried that the thief might somehow notice what was going on behind him.

As the hole appeared and widened and lengthened, the distant voices became clearly audible. Spock was arguing with Beguin, using all the semantic forces at his command, trying to convince him to surrender the box. Chances of that were slim, but the critical thing was to keep the thief occupied long enough for Sulu to slip clear and make a good run at the compacter and its half-hysterical guardian.

With a top line cut through, Sulu started curving the phaser beam down along one side. That done, he switched to the opposite side, still straining for the sound of footsteps outside the crate. As the opening enlarged, he found he could follow the details of the conversation taking place behind him. Spock's steady, calm words alternated with the irregular, high-pitched retorts of Beguin.

Then the phaser began cutting across, parallel to the bottom of the container. Sulu slid his fingers slowly into the nearest vertical crack, gripped firmly. It wouldn't do to have the thick slab of plastic tumble outward to the dome floor. A final snick and the opening was complete. Steadying the cut section with his right hand, the helmsman switched off his phaser and set it down. Then both hands gripped the cutout and pushed. It slid neatly outward and he laid it quietly on the dome.

If his position had been properly gauged, Beguin should be on the exact opposite side of the crate from him. A cautious glance showed only stacks of cylinders and containers ahead.

After a minute had passed without a displacer beam abruptly roasting his container, Sulu crawled out and

readjusted his phaser. A first glance around the tall black square revealed additional piles of material, containers of all sizes and shapes scattered about. There was a hint of motion and he drew back, still watching.

A head and gesturing arm appeared. "Why don't you quit trying to talk me out of here?" Beguin shouted warningly. "I'm not giving up the box."

"You are not leaving Gruyakin with the box in your possession," Spock's distant voice countered immediately.

Beguin was beginning to sound tired. "You already know what happens then. If I don't get what I want in"—there was a brief pause—"in twenty-one hours, I open the box with the compacter and we all die."

"Not necessarily," Spock objected. "We do not know for certain that this box contains a disrupter bomb or other destructive device. In that case, *you* will be the only one to die."

"Maybe you're right," Beguin conceded readily. "I've heard that some of the stasis boxes that were found were undefended. But it doesn't matter, because you can't take that chance, can you?" Beguin concluded with an unholy chuckle.

Everything indicated that the thiefs attention was concentrated solely on the one entrance to the storage dome and that he suspected nothing. Sulu began his approach, working his way patiently across the floor using scattered crates and containers for cover. If anything he was being over-cautious. He would have been difficult to spot even if Beguin had been looking for him.

Very soon he was crouched directly behind the small wall of piled crates and cylinders Beguin had shifted for his own protection. Starting immediately he would have to be extra careful. He wouldn't have any cover inside the circle of containers.

He considered his options once again. At such close quarters, it would be difficult to miss Beguin with a phaser burst. But there was still the chance the thiefs limp body could fall across the compacter trigger, so phaser fire remained a last resort. Somehow he had to find a better way to get the man away from the compacter controls.

At first he had been glad of the jumble of cylinders and crates. They had made his approach to this point fairly easy. But they no longer served a useful function. He hoped to find a gap in the container barricade that he could rush through, but as he inspected the piled boxes he could find no such break in the wall. Certainly he couldn't start pulling crates away. Beguin wouldn't be so distracted by Spock that he would fail to notice someone pulling his ramparts down behind him.

There *had* to be an opening somewhere in the barricade. Moving on hands and knees and keeping as close to the floor as possible, Sulu started off to his left. He had circled almost the entire barricade and was dangerously close to Beguin himself before deciding that this half of the wall was impenetrable. The ongoing dialogue between Spock and the thief formed a surreal accompaniment to his explorations.

Returning, Sulu repeated his search to the right of his original position, with similar results.

One place, where the wall was rather low, was the best he could find. As long as Beguin remained distracted, there was a chance Sulu could scale the wall there and reach the compacter before the thief could trigger it. Once he cleared Beguin from the controls, the commotion would bring Spock, Uhura, and the others running.

Returning to his chosen spot, Sulu leaned against the crates and started edging to a standing position, positioning his right leg for the jump he would have to make. The conversation had faded, but he would wait until the arguments resumed before making the leap.

Sulu's head meanwhile slowly came up and for the first time he glanced into the center of the circle of containers—straight into the startled eyes of the thief! Beguin was gobbling provisions from an opened storage crate. Both men were paralyzed for the briefest of seconds.

Then Beguin whirled, made a dive at the compacter. Desperately Sulu made a jump for him, but even the adrenaline suddenly surging through his body didn't provide him with enough lift to clear the barrier completely. His right foot caught on an upthrust cylinder and sent him sprawling to the floor in a clatter of dislodged crates.

"Wait," Sulu shouted frantically. "*Don't?*"

Beguin, his eyes wild, and perhaps temporarily not sane, was at the compacter. He threw himself onto the trigger. Voices yelled in the distance as Spock and the others, having heard Sulu's shout, began charging the barricade.

They could not outpace the compacter. With a whirr the sides of the device engaged, slammed into the stasis box. A peculiar bone-tingling screech resulted, like a thin metal point dragging across a piece of slate. The sound increased until Sulu's teeth hurt. One edge of the stasis box appeared to crumple slightly inward. Fascinated, Sulu could only stare at what might prove to be the cause of his imminent annihilation.

He had no place to run to, of course. Instinctively he threw an arm across his face to protect his eyes. But if a disruptor bomb were presently being engaged within the box, his arm would make no difference.

Out of the corner of an eye Sulu saw something rise from the surfaces of the box. He was certain the lid hadn't opened and no crack appeared in the smooth metal sides. There was no explosion, no sudden disintegration of matter within the storage dome. Instead, there was a short, soundless, actinic flash that temporarily blinded the helmsman.

The sound of running feet and anxious voices reached the barricade, people swarming over it. Someone bent over Sulu, helped him to his feet.

"Are you all right, Lieutenant?"

"Sulu! What happened?"

He blinked, and tiny suns faded as rods and cones adjusted to the normal light. Spock and Uhura were supporting him, one at each arm.

"I'm okay." He blinked again, rubbed at his eyes with both hands. "What did happen?" Then he was staring apologetically at Spock. "I'm sorry, sir. I couldn't stop him from throwing the trigger. He was standing right next to me when I looked inside for him."

Spock didn't appear angry. On the contrary, his reply was more curious than reproving. "It appears not to matter, Mr. Sulu." The helmsman noticed that the first officer was no

longer looking at him, but instead was staring at something else nearby. "This stasis box is defended, but not by a disruptor bomb. It acts only upon those in its immediate vicinity who try improperly to open it. Look."

Sulu finally did so, turning to stare in the same direction as his superior. The stasis box, to all outward appearances unaffected, still rested in the paralyzed jaws of the compacter. One of the scientists was standing next to the device, which had been turned off, cautiously inspecting the tightly held box.

Jaiao Beguin stood nearby, a surprised expression on his face. He appeared to be completely encased in a softly glowing, silvery material like chrome paint.

"What happened to *him*?" Sulu asked, gaping at the statuelike figure of the thief.

"It would seem," Spock theorized, "that anyone who attempts to open this particular stasis box is promptly enveloped in a stasis box of his own."

"It's not a fatal method of defense, then," said Sulu, unable to keep from staring in fascination at the frozen silvery figure of the unfortunate Beguin.

"Not technically, no," Spock agreed. "Our thief will remain conveniently frozen in time, as would anything encased by a stasis field, until such a time as a stasis-field disruptor can be used to release him safely. It will be quite a useful method of restraining him until a Federation expedition can arrive here with a disruptor and release him from his own field." He added firmly, "At that point he will be transferred to a less exotic but equally confining place of imprisonment."

"If that's all the box does, Mr. Spock, why can't we try and open it ourselves? The worst that could happen would be that the opening device or its operator would also be encased in another stasis field." Uhura eyed the box excitedly.

"Not necessarily, Lieutenant," Spock hastened to correct her. "We do not know by what method the box's defense system decides on who is trying to open it improperly. This time it encased only the immediate operator of the opening device. We cannot assume that if we attempt the same thing the box will not decide to encase the entire station. We have no idea of its limits."

Uhura looked downcast. "We'll have to wait to see what's inside it, then."

Spock nodded. "At least until we rejoin the ship, Lieutenant. I am certain Engineer Scott can construct an adequate stasis-field disruptor." He walked over to the compacter, exchanged a few words with the scientist inspecting it. The woman threw a small switch and the sides of the compacter moved away from the box. Spock picked it up. It rested inert and innocent in his arms. He turned to his two companions.

"First, we must get to Starbase Twenty-Five and rendezvous with the ship. The captain and I allowed ample time for us to reach here, pick up the box, and make rendezvous, so I do not think our unexpected delay will be of any consequence. We still have plenty of time to reach the base before the *Enterprise* is required to depart for Briamos. Nevertheless, I wish to get there as quickly as possible."

Uhura concurred. "I've got to admit I'll feel a lot more comfortable back on board myself."

"And *I'll* feel comfortable," Sulu added fervently, "only when that"—he pointed at the quiescent cube resting in Spock's grasp—"is safely on board the *Enterprise* . . ."

"I want to thank you, Commander," Director Masid was saying as the three officers prepared to board their shuttlecraft, "for relieving us of responsibility for that," and she indicated the stasis box. "Its potential for causing trouble is too explosive for us, even if its defensive mechanism isn't."

"There is no need to thank us, Director Masid," Spock replied from his position atop the boarding ramp. "We were fortunate, and that is no substitute for being skilled. We were all lucky that the box contained something besides a disruptor bomb to defend itself with. Good-bye for now, and good luck with your digging."

"Thanks to you," she murmured as the shuttlecraft thundered into the dark sky, "I think I may be able to enjoy it for a change." She turned to the car waiting to take her back to her office in the administration dome.

It's amazing, she reflected, how a reprieve from expected death can make formerly ordinary work seem fresh and

exciting . . .

V

"Captain? Captain Kirrk!"

Kirk swung the command chair and looked toward the communication station. "What is it, Lieutenant M'ress?"

The Caitian communications officer who had taken over for the absent Lieutenant Uhura had one paw pressed to the left side of her head. She was slightly bent over in her seat and it looked to Kirk as if she was wincing.

"What's the matter, Lieutenant? Are you in pain?" He was immediately concerned.

"No, not exactly, sirr. I . . . I'm not surre what's wrong, but something . . . is. I feel very peculiarr all of a sudden. Dizzy. It's almost familiarr, like something I've felt beforre, but . . . I can't place it." She rose unsteadily in her chair. "I'm afrraid I have to ask to be excused frrom duty, sirr."

"You don't have to ask and there's no need to apologize, Lieutenant. I only hope it's nothing more than a bad headache."

"It . . . doesn't feel like a headache, sirr."

"Report to Sick Bay immediately," Kirk ordered her. "Lieutenant Talliflores will take over for you."

"Yes, sirr." M'ress made a few adjustments to the controls on her console, her hands moving with unaccustomed awkwardness over the familiar instrumentation.

At that point Kirk was out of the chair and striding over to her. "Never mind contacting your relief," he said, worried. "I'll do that myself. Just get to Sick Bay. Think you can make it by yourself?"

"I believe so, sirr."

Despite her assurance, Kirk helped the lieutenant to the turbolift. He left her with a reassuring smile, which turned instantly to an expression of troubled concern when the doors closed behind her.

Back in the command chair, he activated the intercom. M'ress's relief was on recreation time now and probably wouldn't be in his cabin. He set for shipwide general broadcast.

"Lieutenant Talliflores, Lieutenant Talliflores. Report to the bridge immediately."

That task concluded, he leaned back and mused over M'ress's sudden ailment. Why it should trouble him so, he couldn't say. It was only natural that occasionally one of his bridge crew should take sick, despite their usual exemplary healthiness. Perhaps it was because M'ress was always so vibrant and alive. Try as he could, this was the first time he could recall the communications officer falling ill.

And yet . . . hadn't she indicated that her symptoms were akin to something she had suffered before?

He was still mulling over the incident when Lieutenant Talliflores arrived, worried and out of breath.

"I'm sorry, sir, if I—"

"Never mind. There's no problem." Thus assured, the swarthy officer relaxed. "I'm going to have to ask you to take over the remainder of Lieutenant M'ress's shift. You can do double duty until she returns, Talliflores. Your recreation time will be accredited accordingly."

"Yes, sir." Talliflores moved to take up station at communications. In the middle of his standard checkout of the instrumentation, it occurred to him to ask why he was taking M'ress's normal position. "If I may inquire, sir, is anything wrong? Lieutenant M'ress and I went sliding only yesterday. I didn't notice anything wrong with her."

"She complained of not feeling well, and of being dizzy." Kirk offered the officer reassurance he couldn't feel himself. "Probably just a headache. It didn't seem serious, Lieutenant. I expect her back before her shift is up."

"That's good to hear, sir." Talliflores looked relieved. He was a close friend of both M'ress and Uhura. That was only natural since they shared the same station, performed identical duties on different shifts.

But after several hours had passed without the reappearance of M'ress, Kirk felt compelled to check on her

condition. He thumbed the intercom.

"Sick Bay, this is the captain speaking."

"Sick Bay, Nurse Chapel speaking."

"How is Lieutenant M'ress, Chapel?"

There was a brief pause before McCoy's assistant replied. "Fine, as far as I know, Captain. Why?"

Now it was Kirk's turn to hesitate. Something was wrong here. "What do you mean, 'As far as I know'?" he finally replied. "What was wrong with her? Or hasn't Bones made a diagnosis yet?"

"Diagnosis, sir? As far as I know Dr. McCoy hasn't seen Lieutenant M'ress except in the officers' mess or maybe in the recreation section." Chapel's tone turned abruptly from one of puzzlement to concern. "Why, is something wrong with her? If there is, this is the first I've heard of it."

Lieutenant Arex glanced back from his place at the navigation-helm. His quizzical stare was matched by that of lieutenant Vedama, who looked over from the science station.

"Chapel," Kirk finally asked, "didn't Lieutenant M'ress report for treatment of a mild cerebral disorder?" He checked his command-chair chronometer. She ought to have been in Sick Bay for several hours by now."

"Just one moment, sir. I haven't been here long. Let me check today's records." There was a pause while Kirk fidgeted impatiently at the delay.

"No, sir," Chapel eventually informed him. "I see no record of Lieutenant M'ress checking in for observation or any other reason. I believe I—Just a moment, sir."

A new voice sounded over the intercom. "Jim, what's this about Lieutenant M'ress?"

"Bones, M'ress left the bridge over three hours ago. She was complaining of dizziness and other unidentifiable difficulties. She was having difficulty operating her equipment, but she insisted she could make it down to Sick Bay on her own." He took a deep breath. "Apparently she couldn't."

"It doesn't look that way, Jim. I just came on duty myself. I haven't seen her and if Chapel says the records don't show her checking in, well, then she didn't check in."

"That's bad. Hang on a minute, Bones." Kirk turned to communications. "Lieutenant Talliflores, give me security in the officer's section, Deck Five." Talliflores did so.

"Security Deck Five, Ensign Atete speaking."

"Ensign, this is the captain. Lieutenant M'ress is missing. Check her cabin. You have permission to break the lock seal if necessary, to enter."

"Yes, sir," the ensign responded alertly. "A moment."

There was a wait, first while the lieutenant checked to make certain it was indeed Kirk who was speaking to him, and then a longer one while he performed the necessary check.

"No, sir," he finally reported back, "the lieutenant is not in her cabin."

"She may be ill," Kirk told him. "It's possible she fell behind something."

"I made a thorough check, sir. She's nowhere in her quarters."

"Thank you, Atete. Bridge out."

Kirk switched back to his chair communicator, where Sick Bay was waiting on hold. "Bones, she's not in her quarters."

"You said she complained of dizziness and that she had trouble with her instruments, Jim," McCoy repeated carefully. "Did she seem to be in pain?"

"I couldn't tell, but if she was she didn't complain about it," was the captain's reply. "She just said she was feeling peculiar, and that she thought it was familiar. I'd say she was as much confused as sick."

"It doesn't sound like a headache, Jim. I could be wrong. I hope I *am* wrong. I'll check our Caitian references. The important thing is to find her. If she's lying unconscious in a corridor somewhere . . . Let's hope she's just sitting somewhere in a daze."

"I'm going to find out, Bones. Stand by at your end." He faced communications. "Lieutenant Talliflores, give me shipwide broadcast."

"Aye, sir." Talliflores adjusted controls, then signaled to Kirk, who directed his voice to the command-chair pickup.

"Attention, all personnel. Lieutenant M'ress of communications was scheduled to report to Sick Bay some time ago. She did not do so. The lieutenant was suffering from dizziness and possibly more severe disorder as well. Lieutenant, if you hear this and can respond, please go immediately to the nearest communicator and check in with either the bridge or Sick Bay. If you are unable to respond verbally, try to make yourself visible.

"While not neglecting your assigned duties, all personnel are requested to keep an eye out for lieutenant M'ress and to notify Sick Bay as to her location and condition upon seeing her."

He switched off general broadcast, spoke to Sick Bay again. "Unless she's hidden herself somewhere, Bones, that should find her for us quickly."

"I hope so, Jim," the *Enterprise*'s chief physician replied slowly. "It doesn't sound serious . . . yet. But it sure sounds peculiar. Sick Bay out."

"Funny," Kirk mused after McCoy had clicked off, "that's exactly how M'ress described it . . ."

In a quiet section of the small forest that formed part of the *Enterprise*'s recreational area on Deck Eight, a strolling off-duty food technician paused to listen to the Captain's urgent message even as he was curiously eyeing an indistinct form crouching behind a large shrub in front of him, slightly off the main pathway.

As soon as the message ended, he walked toward the bush. "Hey, you there!" The form didn't move out into the open. The technician continued walking toward the bush.

"Say, aren't you Lieutenant M'ress?" he inquired when he got near enough to make out the individual's outline. "Didn't you hear the captain?" Still the figure gave no sign of moving. "You're supposed to report in immediately." Uncertainty gave way to sudden concern. "They said you were supposed to report to Sick Bay. Are you all right, Lieutenant? Can I help?"

He reached out a hand toward the figure. "I said, do you need any—"

Rising in one motion, the figure spun violently on the startled crewman. Wide, glaring cat eyes blazed at him, nostrils flared widely, and the slim figure was puffed to more than normal size. It was not the appearance the technician expected from a ranking officer.

Slowly he took a step backward, away from the heavily breathing figure. "Now take it easy, just slow down a moment, ma'am. If you've got some kind of sickness or something . . . I don't think I'd better—"

The technician whirled, turned to run. His mouth opened as he framed a call for help. As it developed, he managed neither a shout nor retreat. Lieutenant M'ress fairly exploded off the grass. As she landed on the man's back her hands went around his neck and both squirming, struggling shapes fell hard to the ground.

VI

Like a dull white copepod swimming in some unimaginably vast ocean's black depths, the shuttlecraft *Copernicus* raced for Starbase Twenty-Five and its rendezvous with the *Enterprise*. Within the shuttle's control room the Slaver stasis box, fifty centimeters on each side but considerably larger in import, gleamed metallically in the center of the single rest table.

Spock was pacing back and forth near the table while Sulu manned the tiny craft's controls. Uhura stood near him, staring out the fore port at the slowly changing panorama spread out ahead of them.

They were back on schedule, which meant they had plenty of time to reach the Starbase before the *Enterprise* was required to leave for Briamos. But that was small comfort to Spock. He was regretting every hour of the learning sessions Kirk must be attending on Briamos and its inhabitants, sorry for every detail he was not present to absorb firsthand.

In addition, he was as anxious as Uhura and Sulu to learn what the enigmatic stasis box contained. Only on board the *Enterprise* could he and Engineer Scott assemble a proper stasis disruptor for safely opening the ancient container.

Bored with the view forward, Uhura turned to the less spectacular but more intriguing object resting on the table. She gazed speculatively at the box. With ample time to do nothing but reflect on what it might contain, she had managed to conjure any number of incredible wonders—though they were wonders no larger than fifty centimeters on a side.

Inside that unimpressive cube of metal time had stood still for perhaps a billion years. Certainly whatever relics lay so magnificently preserved had to be valuable, as the contents of stasis boxes usually were. And maybe dangerous as well, as they often were. She no longer had any doubts about the value of whatever lay inside. The box's unique method of

protecting itself all but stated that something inside was well worth defending from the casually curious.

Spock was making notations in his pocket recorder when he noticed Uhura's stare. "Speculation is no less intriguing for usually being inaccurate, Lieutenant."

"I *was* wondering what might be inside, Mr. Spock. I know a little about the Slaver Empire, but not enough to make an accurate guess."

"You have a great deal of company, Lieutenant," the first officer assured her. "Our entire store of information concerning the empire of the Slavers is sketchy at best. We know that they were masters of all the intelligent life in this part of the galaxy a billion years ago. That is a long time for anything in the way of reliable information to have survived. It's hardly surprising that so little has."

"Masters of the galaxy until a billion years ago . . ." Uhura murmured wonderingly. "Until one race finally mounted a successful revolt. It must have been a time of chaos." Her gaze went from Spock back to the stasis box. "Are these the only sources of information we have about their empire?"

Spock turned away, eyed the blaze of stars forward. "The only factual ones. Even rumors die in that length of time. But we have learned a little."

Uhura turned to listen, moved forward again. In doing so, she missed the sudden appearance of a slightly blue glow that materialized around the box. Its teardrop shape was silent. The tip of the azure halo pointed forward.

"The Slavers," Spock declared, ignorant of the mysterious aura which had enveloped the box behind him, "and all their subjects were exterminated in the war that followed that eons-old revolt. Intelligent life had to evolve all over again in this part of the galaxy." He fell silent, thoughtful. "So far," he eventually added, "the stasis boxes are the only remnants we've been able to find of those many lost and doubtless great civilizations."

He frowned, noticed Uhura staring as if mesmerized behind him. "Something wrong, Lieutenant."

By way of answer, she pointed. "Why is it glowing like that? It wasn't doing that before."

Spock whirled and saw for the first time the unmistakable aura which had encapsulated the box. Moving to his right, he noted its shape, let his gaze travel naturally from the point of the teardrop shape back out the front port. Ahead and drifting slowly to starboard was an impressively radiating spiral, a stellar object sufficiently spectacular that it had to be on the charts. He thought he recognized it.

His attention turned back to the no-longer-inert stasis box. The point of the teardrop, he was convinced, was not stable but instead was shifting slowly. Not unexpectedly, it was changing to a starboard direction.

"Mr. Sulu, what is our current position?"

Sulu executed a fast check of his instruments and glanced back over a shoulder as he spoke. "Passing Beta Lyrae, sir. One hundred and forty-two degrees northeast of the galactic plane." At this point he noticed the glowing blue cloud enveloping the box. "Where did that come from?"

The point of the blue aura was still moving steadily to starboard, tracking the changing position of Beta Lyrae as efficiently as any instrument.

"We do not know where it comes from or how the box produces it, Mr. Sulu, but it is not a unique phenomenon. I have heard of such a thing happening before. Most unexpected and most fortuitous."

"Fortuitous? I don't understand." The helmsman looked understandably confused.

"The motion of the blue aura surrounding our box," Spock explained, "would indicate that there is another stasis box orbiting Beta Lyrae."

Uhura was equally new to the phenomenon described by Spock. "Another one!"

Spock appeared baffled, almost hesitant to answer. "It is, as I said, unexpected. Your surprise is well justified, Lieutenant Uhura. It seems most illogical for a stasis box to remain in this vicinity, undiscovered, for so long. Beta Lyrae is one of the most impressive sights and one of the rarest in the explored galaxy. Every ship that passes by would likely slow to observe and enjoy its spectacle at leisure.

"Still, the only known stasis-box detector is another stasis box. Detection is, obviously, by means of that blue aura. Perhaps none of the many vessels passing Beta Lyrae possessed a stasis box. But given the number of observers, both casual and scientific, who must have spent a good deal of time in this vicinity, I confess to being puzzled that a stasis box's peculiar characteristics have remained undiscovered for so long."

He broke off to take another look at the glowing box. By now the point of the teardrop had shifted around to a position facing forty-five degrees aft of the shuttle. Rapidly, he considered the time and date, made some hasty calculations. As important as it was for all three of them to attend the Briamosite briefings at Starbase 25, this was something that they could not ignore. While their presence at the pre-conference briefings was desirable, it was not critical.

"Mr. Sulu . . ." he began, reaching an inevitable decision once all the relevant facts had been considered.

Sulu glanced back at him hopefully. "Yes, sir?" That was all he said. No suggestions were offered, no arguments presented. They weren't necessary. Spock could tell by the expressions on their faces how the two other officers felt. Not that they influenced his decision. His new orders were based solely, as always, on logic.

"Bring us about," he directed the helmsman, fulfilling the latter's hopes. "We will investigate the Beta Lyrae system and attempt to locate the source of the activity affecting our own stasis box."

Sulu couldn't repress a pleased smile. "Aye, aye, sir."

Coming around in a tight arc, the *Copernicus* slowed and plunged deep into the double-star system of Beta Lyrae.

Under Spock's direction, made after a careful study of the shifting stasis box aura, Sulu brought the little ship close in. The closeup view of the unusual binary was as awesome and beautiful as anything in the galaxy. Their viewport was filled with the nebulous yellow giant star, which was the most obvious feature of the system. It was somewhat flattened by the force of gravity and rotation. A line of fiery red hydrogen joined it to its smaller companion, a brilliant dwarf star that shone like a sapphire cabochon. A whirlpool of thin crimson

like a streamer of fringed crepe spread out from the blue star in an expanding spiral. The hydrogen faded from pigeon-blood red to dull maroon to a smoky blackness. Even the blackness announced its presence by blotting out the stars lying behind it.

"It's a beautiful universe," Uhura murmured as she drank in the overpowering sight, "and a varied one."

"The beauty's in the variety," Sulu added, equally entranced.

Spock was talking less poetically into his recorder and did not comment so blatantly on Beta Lyrae's attraction, though he admired it as well. Besides its obvious chromatic effects, there was an inherent attractiveness in the order and balance of gravitational and other forces, in the precision of the system's mathematics. Nor was that view exclusively Vulcan. Many human scientists would have found the physical construction of the binary more impressive than its mere visual appearance.

At the moment he was explaining their course into his recorder. "Stasis boxes and their contents are the only remnant of a species powerful enough to have ruled, once, an entire section of our galaxy," he dictated. "Their effect on our sciences has been incalculable. In one box was found the flying belt which was the key to the artificial gravity field presently employed on starships.

"Hence my decision to forgo the briefings preparatory to the conference on Briamos in favor of pursuing a positive lead to another such box in the Beta Lyrae system." He clicked off, put the recorder aside. They were moving near to the object that the *Copernicus*'s compact but efficient instrumentation had long since located.

It was a frozen, almost airless world, a dull white globe too far out to receive appreciable warmth from either of the twin suns. It was as ordinary and unimpressive as the binary was stupendous. In any case, they were not searching for life or a world to colonize but, instead, for another of the Slavers' valuable bequests, the box which was simultaneously inheritance and tombstone.

"Beginning final approach," Sulu announced mechanically, "preparatory to orbital insertion."

Soon they were circling the equator of the chill planet. Measurements indicated that in comparison to the surface rotating beneath them, Earth's most inhospitable tundra was a vision of Elysium and its South Pole a veritable paradise.

"Now, Mr. Sulu."

The helmsman didn't have to look behind him. He knew that the point of the teardrop aura must be stabbing straight down through the mess table.

"Commence landing approach," Spock continued formally. "Try to take us down in as tight a descending spiral as you can, Lieutenant."

"I'll do my best, sir," Sulu assured him, his attention riveted on his readouts and controls.

"That will minimize our searching," Spock informed them, "if we can keep the point of the aura perfectly perpendicular with the surface below us. The second stasis box should be directly under us when we land, or at the very least within walking distance." He moved to stand by the front port.

"If the box is out in the open, visual identification before we touch down is vital. We must take care in that event not to set down on top of the box. In addition to the inconvenience, the box mechanism might interpret our touchdown as an attempt at opening it improperly. We could conceivably find ourselves in the position of our boxed thief back on Gruyakin Six."

"Don't, worry, sir," Sulu replied tersely. "I have no intention of standing around for the next billion years, no matter how healthy or well-preserved a stasis field keeps me."

They dropped through the thin, almost nonexistent atmosphere. Sulu brought the shuttle to a smooth stop on a jumbled, frozen plain. Spock assured him they had *not* set down on the box itself. At the last moment the point of the teardrop had shifted slightly to port, indicating that they would land clear of it.

Faint wisps of as-yet-unidentified gases drifted overhead, the only indication that anything lay between the roof of the shuttlecraft and the killing emptiness of interstellar space.

Spock walked back to the stasis box as the helmsman cut the engines. He studied it intently. "What would *you* say, Lieutenant Uhura?"

She bent over, stared beneath the table where the point of the blue aura penetrated. "It's certainly not pointing straight down. I'd say it's inclined slightly in . . . that direction." She rose and pointed.

"I agree." Spock moved forward and stared hard out the port in the direction the aura point indicated. "Yet . . . I see no sign of another box, at least not nearby. It is there, however. This is not surprising, in view of the unevenness of the terrain. Life-support belts."

They moved to the single large storage locker, slipped the belts around their waists. Spock checked Uhura and Sulu's belt operation with a compact device taken from the locker. Then Sulu checked Spock and Uhura; and then it was Uhura's turn. Thus double-checked and assured that all systems were functioning properly, the three officers entered the *Copernicus*'s airlock, each encased in a lime-yellow aura no denser than the mysterious blue one surrounding the stasis box they had taken with them.

Sulu and Uhura each had their phasers out and ready—a standard precaution. They had had little time for pre-inspection of this world and experience had shown that a planet which seemed devoid of life could often provide as many unpleasant surprises as a far more fertile and hospitable globe. Spock was carrying the stasis box, flanked on the right by Uhura and by Sulu on the left. The blue aura now pointed straight ahead. The lock cycled, and a brief puff of unreclaimed air escaped into the alienness beyond.

The three exited into a frozen hell. They saw no hint of any life, malignant or otherwise. Not a plant, not an insect, only an icy plain bordered by rippling, jagged hills and distant mountains of ice-bound stone that had likely never felt the weak warmth of the distant binary. It was difficult for any world orbiting a twin sun to support life, due to the often erratic nature of its planetary orbit. The frozen emptiness of Beta Lyrae I appeared to be no exception.

As they walked across the ice-covered ground the glow from the stasis box in Spock's arms intensified, turned almost azure. In contrast, the lime-yellow halos projected by their life-support belts remained constant. As always, Uhura reflected on how feebly inadequate these seemed, to be the

only thing holding back the monstrous cold and airlessness pressing tight around them.

In many ways the stark, dead landscape they were crossing was more forbidding than empty space. The interstellar void was merely sterile, while the corpse of a world on which life could exist, given a few changes in atmosphere and location, was almost palpably threatening.

Uhura was not afraid to give voice to her feelings. Besides, it was reassuring to hear another voice in that desolation, even if Spock and Sulu were right next to her. "I never did like these barren little worlds. They always make me feel as if I'm walking on one huge grave."

"We're not tourists here, Lieutenant," Spock commented firmly. "Kindly keep your mind on the business at hand."

Uhura bristled at the harshness of the reprimand. However, Spock's intention had not been to reprimand her but only to take her mind off the depressing landscape surrounding them, which he succeeded efficiently in doing.

"Mr. Spock?" Sulu stepped lightly over a miniature crevasse. "If it takes one stasis box to find another stasis box, how did they find the very first one?"

"I would like to say that its presence was deduced, Lieutenant Sulu. I would like to relate that it was discovered after a great deal of study based on material carefully assimilated by a number of highly competent researchers utilizing the most modern technology. However," he continued drily, "that is not what happened.

"The first Slaver stasis box was discovered the same way as so many truly unique phenomena are—by accident." He turned slightly to his left, following the compass point of the blue aura toward a low rise topped with freshly cracked ice.

They mounted the rise. Spock halted, retraced his steps several meters, moved a little to his right. At that point the apex of the blue glow jabbed straight down. All that lay visible below their feet was hard-packed frozen gas and water vapor. Sulu pushed at the surface with a life-support, aura-shielded boot.

"The other box appears to be almost under us, or at least very close by," Spock announced. "If I recall correctly what is

known about the inter-stasis box relationship, then judging from the hue and sharpness of the field this one is projecting," and he motioned with the stasis box in his hands, "I would guess that the other lies perhaps thirty meters below us. Considering," and he indicated the surrounding tortured topography, "the evidence of violent tectonic disturbances in this region, that is hardly surprising. We should be grateful the box is buried no deeper than it is."

Sulu was adjusting his phaser setting as he spoke. "In that case it shouldn't be too long before we can dig it out, especially if this is mostly ice beneath us." He finished setting the phaser, pointed it downward. "In this low pressure the ice should boil away as soon as our phasers melt it, and on this low a setting"—he indicated his own weapon—"we don't run any risk of damaging the box. We ought to be able to—"

He stumbled as the ground heaved. A violent explosion burst the surface behind them, sending ice fragments flying. Stunned, they turned as soon as they could recover their balance. Uhura remembered what Spock had said about severe earth disturbances in this region.

But the explosion had been too localized for a quake, too modest for a volcano, and it was immediately apparent that the cause was artificial in nature. A concealed tunnel or cave had appeared in the ice. A half-dozen space-suited figures flew toward them from the opening, propulsive backpacks powering them toward the three shocked officers.

Sulu caught a glimpse of who wore those suits and knew instantly he would have preferred a volcano.

Each suited figure was a little over two and a half meters long. Their pressure suits were armored to withstand both phaser charges and solid-core weaponry. The bubble helmets topping the suits were fully transparent. The suits themselves could have been designed to accommodate human beings, save for their unusual size and the long, twisting segmented sections which extended from the base of the spine. They indicated tailed creatures.

Only one known race fitted those particular proportions.

"Kzinti!" Uhura, crouching and raising her phaser simultaneously, let go a blast. The energy charge glanced harmlessly off the armored suit of the nearest alien.

Another of the Kzinti fired at Sulu. There was a flare of darker light against his life-support aura.

The aliens had surrounded them. One landed just behind the helmsman, tried to lock massive arms around him. Sulu slipped partially clear, wrestling desperately with his much larger opponent.

Behind the helmet a startlingly feline face stared angrily down at him. The alien tried to pin Sulu's arms while keeping a grip on its phaser, a standard-issue Federation weapon which looked grotesquely tiny in an armored, four-digited paw that could easily have enclosed both of Sulu's hands. Bright pink ears that resembled the amputated wings of some tiny flying creature fluttered on the alien's head as it battled in frustration to secure a binding grip on its smaller but agile opponent.

Despite Sulu's agility, this was a fight which could have only one outcome, since the three Federation officers were both outsized and outnumbered by their alien attackers.

Two other Kzinti landed behind Sulu, and he was unable to avoid them all. They soon had him pinned between them.

Just before one phaser blast partially penetrated her life-support aura and knocked her unconscious to the chill surface, Uhura was certain she glimpsed Spock standing calmly nearby, watching the fight. He still held the stasis box in both hands, instead of a working phaser.

As she fell, she saw him handing the invaluable stasis box to one of the huge Kzinti. Her mind refused to accept the evidence of her eyes. The impossible thought that Spock could be a coward or worse occurred to her as the alien environment her life-support aura held at bay seemed to close in tight around and blot all thinking and speculation from her mind.

Sulu had been phaser-stunned when he refused an order to stop struggling. Now the Kzinti muttered among themselves, their attention shifting constantly from the stasis box to the two crumpled humans. They kept a watchful eye or two on Spock. The Vulcan made no move to resist when one of them asked gruffly over his helmet frequency for the phaser the officer still wore at his waist. Spock handed it over as docilely as he had the stasis box.

Once their last possible opponent had been rendered helpless, the aliens relaxed a little. Spock took the opportunity to study the motionless forms of his companions. Both Sulu and Uhura seemed to be breathing regularly. Their lime-yellow auras remained intact and strong, indicating that the belt mechanisms hadn't been damaged. That meant they were in no immediate danger. Their life-support belts would sense the change in their metabolisms and adjust accordingly, just as they would if the two officers had fallen asleep instead of having been stunned into unconsciousness.

Spock's thoughts were mixed but steady as always when, by gesturing, the Kzinti indicated he should move toward the tunnel they had appeared from so unexpectedly. Other Kzinti hefted the unconscious forms of Uhura and Sulu, while one more picked up the coveted stasis box. There was a good deal of recognizable chortling over the prize, which indicated the presence of something far more elaborate than a casual trap.

A short march down a phaser-cut tunnel brought the party to an open airlock. One Kzinti gave Spock an ungentle shove into the open chamber. The first officer made no protest, offered not even a hint of displeasure at the rough treatment.

It took three cycles for every member of the group to be transferred into the fresh air of the Kzinti ship. The design of the lock and numerous other aspects of construction immediately indicated to Spock that they were boarding a vessel, and not a totally unfamiliar one at that. But then, most of Kzinti technology was derivative of Federation or Klingon engineering.

Further marching through the powerfully scented air brought the party to what appeared to be a crew ready room. In keeping with the requirements of Kzinti physiology, the room was huge by Federation standards. An oddly shaped table large enough for several Kzinti to sit comfortably around dominated the center of the room. Lockers and instrument panels lined one entire wall. Again, nothing was remarkable about the instrumentation. Much of it looked familiar, although altered in some cases to accommodate the size of the Kzinti hand.

Gently, almost reverently, a Kzinti put the stasis box onto the massive central table. The rest of the group gathered

around and began an animated discussion of their booty.

Spock watched them silently, occasionally glancing sideways at Uhura and Sulu to make certain their condition didn't suddenly take a change for the worse. In his own mind he had already taken full responsibility for the catastrophe. But that was unfair, as any outside observer would have insisted.

True, he had pointed out the unusual circumstance of another undiscovered stasis box lying within an oft-visited system like Beta Lyrae. He should have exercised greater caution in their search for the second box, should have seen the clues to the Kzinti presence even though they were concealed beyond the detecting ability of any mortal.

Kirk would have been the first to point out that Spock had no choice but to pursue the possible existence of the second box, and that he could not possibly have foreseen or guessed at the presence of the waiting Kzinti. But Spock was ever more critical of his actions than anyone else could be.

But an event detrimental to the interests of the Federation had occurred as a result of his decisions. He was guilty and condemned—unless the error could somehow, unlikely as that seemed, still be rectified before permanent damage was done. The Kzinti possessed the stasis box he and the others had traveled so fast and far to pick up. Its contents now became doubly important. Not only would they not be used to benefit the peoples of the Federation, but in the hands of the belligerent Kzinti they could be employed to bring only harm.

How much harm depended on the exact nature of those contents.

Spock was anxious to see inside. He had a perverse desire to know exactly how much damage his actions had caused the people of the Federation and the Federation itself.

A human experiencing the same thoughts might have screamed and damned himself, begging for his captors to shoot him in punishment for his mistake. Spock merely stood quietly. He faced the theft of the box as calmly as he had its acquisition. An observer would not be able to tell from his demeanor that the Kzinti had even arrived. Only his mind was operating much faster than before, and that was not visible.

Moans came from nearby. Sulu and Uhura were beginning to stir, recovering from the stun effects of the phasers. As soon as they were able to stand by themselves, a pair of Kzinti moved to assist them roughly in rising all the way. They escorted both groggy officers over to Spock and left them standing next to the first officer.

Spock had already noted the surface on which he had been directed to stand, and on which Sulu and Uhura now swayed unsteadily. Roughly five square meters of a thick metal mesh, it resembled a carpet woven of steel instead of fiber. He had recognized it as soon as they'd entered the large room. It was a police web, one identical to those used by Federation authorities for restraining prisoners without damaging them. The webs were portable and much simpler to maintain than an energy—or solid-barrier cubicle. When not needed, the jail "cell" could simply be rolled up and tucked away in a locker somewhere.

His observation was immediately confirmed. A Kzin nearby touched a wall control. Spock instantly felt himself paralyzed from the shoulders down. The force field generated by the mesh held him as firmly as any visibly bonds. The field was strong enough to retard perspiration in a prisoner, but given the cool climate of the ready room and the fact that their incarceration was likely to be brief, he didn't expect that would be a problem. As a bonus, the field kept the still unsteady Uhura and Sulu from falling over.

It took an effort, but Spock managed to turn his head enough to see his companions. They were beginning to regain full control of their nervous systems, including their minds. When they came around completely there would be questions, and Spock prepared himself for some awkward ones.

Uhura blinked, tried to take a step toward him, and found she was unable to move so much as a toe. Her head also came around slowly. "Mr. Spock . . . where are we?"

"Inside a Kzinti spacecraft, Lieutenant. Of what size and capability I have been unable to determine."

"Just a minute." Sulu was taking in their surroundings, eyeing the cluster of arguing Kzinti around the table. "Something doesn't make sense here—Wait, I remember now.

Kzinti aren't supposed to have hand phasers, let alone space armor. Where did they get those weapons?" He gestured at the nearest Kzin and the pair of phasers slung at its hips.

"I don't know, Mr. Sulu, but you are quite right about their possession of weapons." Spock recited, "The Treaty of Sirius does not permit them any weapons capabilities at all, beyond the operation of a few police vessels. Obviously, the treaty has been broken."

The Kzinti left the room, still growling and grunting among themselves.

"This severe violation must be reported," Spock went on, "as soon as we reach Starbase Twenty-Five."

Sulu's expression was more eloquent than words, as if to say, *You mean,* if *we reach Starbase Twenty-Five.* But he didn't say that. Instead, his attention shifted to the grated surface they were standing on.

"Police web. We won't be able to do anything unless we can turn it off somehow."

They were left alone to discuss their plight for some time, before equipment-laden Kzinti re-entered the room. Under the direction of one Kzin with engineer's markings they deposited the equipment around the central table.

Devoid of their pressure suits they looked a lot like plump orange cats, save for their fanlike ears and the furless, pink, ratlike tail that twitched and moved restlessly behind each of them. Each was of considerable bulk, and an unmistakable, if feral, gleam of intelligence shone behind every pair of blazing yellow eyes.

As they chattered among themselves and moved equipment and instrumentation about, Spock concentrated on noting differences between individuals. For the most part these were slight. One Kzin had a bright patch of white on its nose. Another's fur was colored to form a pair of dark stripes over both eyes. These minor differences made the startling appearance of the last Kzin to enter the room all the more striking. In contrast to the healthy, robust girth of its companions, the newcomer was thin—downright scrawny. Instead of twitching restlessly about, its tail drooped to drag

listlessly on the deck, and the pink batlike ears curled flat against the head as though soaked by a month's rain.

Along all of one flank, the dense orange fur was twisted and matted beyond combing, as if the Kzin slept exclusively on the same side and never moved. The fur resembled the gnarled hair of a dog, repeatedly washed and dried, who broke the cycle by rolling in mud. Nor was the expression of the newcomer normal. Instead of the other Kzinti's usual fierce or proud demeanor, this one wore a look of perpetual disillusionment.

Uhura decided that the scrawny arrival was either dreadfully unhappy or haunted by some as-yet-unknown affliction. "What are they up to now, Mr. Spock?" She gestured with her head at the compact but complex machine that was being erected alongside the central table. "What's that?"

"I cannot be positive." Spock had to raise his voice to make himself audible over the increasing yowls and grumblings of the orange-colored assembly. "But from the haste and excitement with which they are supervising the construction of the device, I would guess that despite differences in design and crudeness of engineering, it is a stasis-field nullifier."

"They're going to try to open the box, then, and there's nothing we can do to stop them." Sulu was simultaneously angry and downcast.

"It is the logical thing to do—and you needn't whisper, Lieutenant. At the moment they seem to have absolutely no interest in us. So we can talk normally, without much fear of being abused, although a certain amount of caution in what we discuss would be advisable."

He gestured with his head toward the far side of the room. "You see the lean, bedraggled Kzin, the last one to enter the chamber?"

"You mean the one back there in the corner?" Uhura asked.

"Yes. He is a reader of minds, a telepath."

"I thought I'd heard something about that." Uhura looked satisfied. "I remember reading that all Kzinti telepaths were unhappy neurotics who'd just as soon not have their special talents." She nodded ruefully. "That one sure fits the description. What a miserable-looking creature." At her last

words, the telepath cringed. That also was typical of his condition. A normal Kzin so slighted would be on top of Uhura by now, frothing at the mouth.

Spock warned them again. "There is no sure way to guard our thoughts from him. Orally we can say what we wish, but mentally we must be constantly on guard." He paused a moment, thoughtful, then added, "Lieutenant Sulu, the telepath is not likely to concentrate much on Lieutenant Uhura or myself. For different reasons, she and I are considered by the Kzinti to be inferior beings.

"It will be helpful to keep in mind that the Kzinti are meat-eaters. If you sense that ugly one probing your thoughts, there are better things to concentrate on besides visions of resistance or hate. I believe it would be more effective if you were to concentrate at such moments on enjoying a raw vegetable. The thought of eating anything not-meat is repulsive in the extreme to a Kzin. Even the most perceptive among them cannot think rationally if afflicted with overpowering nausea, and I expect that to hold true for telepaths as well."

"Yes, sir. I'll concentrate on wallowing in salad." Sulu looked pleased at the thought. "Maybe I can goad them into revealing something of their intentions, besides opening the stasis box, of course."

"There is one other things we should all keep in mind." Spock fought his own neck muscles in order to turn his head to look at the *Enterprise*'s chief communications officer. "Lieutenant Uhura, what I am about to say may be critical, and it will be difficult to comply with. While we are in the presence of the Kzinti, do not say anything, do not suggest anything, do not do anything inventive. You must strive to look harmless, ignorant, virtually inanimate."

"Any special reason, sir?"

"Are you forgetting that Kzinti females are no more than dumb animals?" Spock tried to tell whether or not the scraggly Kzin telepath was concentrating on him, then decided that if anything he was still wholly absorbed with monitoring his fellows and possibly also Sulu.

"In an emergency," he reminded Uhura, "the Kzinti may forget that a human female is an intelligent creature, capable

of original thought and activities beyond the merely instinctive ones of eating and sleeping."

"Thanks," snapped Uhura. "Thanks a lot, *sir*."

Spock was patient. The lieutenant's gut reaction was only to be expected. "Lieutenant Uhura, I value your intelligence highly. So does Lieutenant Sulu, and everyone else on board the *Enterprise*. But we may be able to seize an opportunity to escape if the Kzinti believe you have none. This is not a time for emotional reactions. Let the Kzinti react emotionally, as they are inclined to do. Our chances lie in calculation and reason . . . and in being ready."

Uhura replied much more softly this time. "Yes sir . . . You're right, of course." She smiled a dangerous little smile. "Don't worry. I'll do my damnedest to convince our captors that I'm nothing more than an automaton."

VII

Kirk moved continually between the command chair, the science station, and the helm-navigation console. Under the guise of inspecting readouts and information, he was really disguising his nervousness. Having places to walk to concealed the fact that he was in a mood to pace the floor.

Another distraction was the *last* thing he needed. He should have been able to concentrate all his attention on the upcoming conference, save for wondering how Spock, Sulu, and Uhura were progressing in their expedition to pick up the Slaver stasis box. Now he had a fresh, utterly unexpected problem on his hands. There was still no word on the whereabouts of Lieutenant M'ress, and the Caitian communications officer hadn't reported herself in to Sick Bay.

He didn't know it, but his troubles were about to be complicated a dozenfold.

"Captain?"

Kirk slid heavily into the command chair, swung to face communications. "Yes, what is it?"

Lieutenant Talliflores looked confused and unhappy. "I have two reports just in, sir."

Kirk perked up a little. "They've found Lieutenant M'ress?"

"No, sir. One report is from Engineering. Commander Scott says that one of his warp-drive techs, an ensign M'viore, has disappeared." Talliflores checked his recorder readout. "The other report *is* from Security, but it has nothing to do with Lieutenant M'ress. One of their own ensigns engaged in the search, name of R'leez, has vanished and does not acknowledge her orders."

"Both Caitians," a concerned Kirk declared after a brief pause. "That makes three of them: M'ress, and now this R'leez and M'viore." Swiveling in the chair, he looked to the science station.

"Mr. Vedama, I don't believe we have any other Caitians in the crew, but would you check, please?"

"Aye, sir," Vedama responded in his soft, lilting voice. It took only a few seconds to run the check through the computer. "You're right, sir. Those three are the only representatives of the planet Cait listed in the personnel records."

"Obviously we're dealing with a Caitian racial malady, then," Kirk announced. "But what? Some kind of disease, maybe, but how could they all be affected so fast? None was near the others when they were stricken. How could a disease be communicated so quickly throughout the ship? Unless Caitians are subject to periodic attacks of madness. But I've never heard of anything like that affecting them."

"Neither have I, sir," his acting science chief added.

"Excuse me, sir." It was Talliflores again.

"Now what?"

"A report coming in from Sick Bay, Captain. Dr. McCoy wants to talk to you."

Kirk allowed himself a sigh of relief. "At least Lieutenant M'ress has made it safely to Sick Bay. Maybe Bones has some idea by now of what's causing the Caitians to act this way." He flipped on his chair intercom. "Bones, how is she?"

"How is who, Jim?" McCoy sounded unusually tense and irritated.

Kirk's spirits sank. "Didn't Lieutenant M'ress report in to you yet?"

"No, she hasn't, Jim. And now I desperately wish she would, because I have reason to believe she isn't going to."

"You sound awfully positive, Bones. What makes you so sure?"

"Jim, I've got a food technician here, an Ensign Sanchez. He insists that he found Lieutenant M'ress crouching under a bush in the recreation forest area. She didn't respond when he called out to her, so he walked over to see if he could help. He heard your broadcast and thought she might've been too sick to respond."

"Go on, Bones," urged Kirk tensely.

"Not only wasn't she too ill to respond, Jim, but when he approached her she attacked him."

Kirk felt dazed. He conjured up an image of the communications officer in his mind: calm, efficient, usually in complete control of herself . . . It didn't fit.

But neither did her not reporting to Sick Bay.

"Bones, is he certain it was M'ress?"

"Just a second, Jim. You can ask him yourself."

A shaky voice replaced that of Dr. McCoy. "Sir, Ensign Sanchez here. Yes, sir, I'm positive it was Lieutenant M'ress."

Even as he listened, Kirk found it hard to believe. He was even willing to go as far as to ascribe the incident to a delusion on the ensign's part, except that M'ress *was* missing. While Sanchez sounded upset, he was perfectly coherent. There was no reason to discount his description of the encounter.

But Kirk was still incredulous. He had to be certain M'ress's actions were the result of some aberration on her part. "You say she attacked you, Ensign? I've known Lieutenant M'ress ever since she was assigned to the *Enterprise*. She's a competent, responsible officer, hardly the type given to irrational acts and especially to an act of violence against another crew member. You're positive you did nothing to provoke her?"

"Provoke her, sir?" In spite of his condition, the ensign managed to sound suitably outraged. "Sir, all I did was repeat to her what she must have heard herself, that you'd directed her to report to Sick Bay. The moment I made a move to touch her she gave me this crazy look. I started to back off, intending to call for medical help, and that's when she jumped me. I swear, sir, all I did was offer to help her, and when she made it clear she didn't want any help, try to get away."

"I can verify Ensign Sanchez's story, Jim," said McCoy, cutting in. "He has a substantial number of pretty deep scratches. Even well-trimmed Caitian claws can inflict rugged damage if they're used in anger. They're much thicker than human fingernails."

"Captain." It was Sanchez again. He sounded almost defiant. "I'm sorry to have to say this about a superior officer, but I don't think the lieutenant is quite sane. She didn't

respond to any of the things I said, either before I approached her or while we were fighting."

"Did she say anything at all, Ensign?" By now Kirk had reluctantly accepted Sanchez's story. The scratches detailed by McCoy were the final convincer.

"Only in Caitian, sir, a lot of yowling and screeching it seemed like to me. I don't know the language, but she *sounded* as angry as she was acting. Frankly, sir, from the look in her eyes I thought she was ready to kill me." Sanchez paused a moment, added emphatically, "It was raw emotion I saw in her face, sir. The kind of expression you expect on the face of a crazy animal, not a superior officer. That's only my impression, of course, and I couldn't get too analytical about things. I was too busy trying to keep from being cut up."

"I understand, Sanchez." The ensign could be forgiven, Kirk felt, for exaggerating his impressions in the hysteria of the moment. Kirk was about ready to give vent to some emotions of his own.

"Bones, you can finish treating the ensign and release him. Sanchez, just one last question for you."

"Yes, sir," said the ensign.

"You told me that you thought Lieutenant M'ress was ready to kill you. Why didn't she? Did you fight her off? I presume neither of you was armed."

"No, sir. At least, if she had a weapon, she didn't show it. But me, fight her off? On the contrary, sir. I'm about her size, maybe a little bigger, but it was like tangling with a small tornado. No, sir, I didn't fight her off. It was pretty funny, now that I think back on it. She just kind of stopped all at once, gave me this real peculiar look . . ."

"What kind of look, ensign?" This was McCoy speaking.

"It's hard to describe, sir. Like she was sorry for what she'd done and yet she'd do it again in a minute. Then she took off and disappeared into the landscaping."

"Do you think she's still down in the recreation area?" Kirk thought to ask.

"I couldn't say, sir." Sanchez sounded exhausted. "I didn't hang around to look for her. All I could think of was getting out of there with the rest of my skin intact."

"All right, Ensign. Thank you. Bridge out."

"Sick Bay out," McCoy responded.

Kirk turned to his science officer. "Lieutenant Vedama, what do you make of all this? First, Lieutenant M'ress disappears and then two Caitian ensigns, and now I learn that one of my most trusted officers is running around silently attacking other members of the crew."

"Sir," Vedama announced apologetically, "I'm no expert on the Caitians."

"My second in command of communications goes berserk, without any visible reason, and no one knows anything!" Kirk sounded understandably peeved. "Lieutenant Vedama, see what you can find on Caitian social patterns. Dr. McCoy will be researching possible medical causes. Maybe it's not a medical problem."

"Yes, sir." Vedama turned to the science computer, began his searching.

Kirk's attention shifted forward. "Mr. Arex, are we still on course schedule for arrival at Starbase Twenty-Five?"

"Slightly ahead of time, sir," the Edoan navigator replied. "Shall I change our speed?"

"No. We'll resolve this trouble before we arrive. Maintain heading and warp-speed." He glanced back at communications.

"Lieutenant Talliflores, relay a message to Security. Tell them I want search teams on every deck to hunt for Lieutenant M'ress and the two absent ensigns. Inform them that all three Caitians are probably dangerous, prone to violent response if approached, and possibly not responsible for their actions.

"Under no circumstances are any of the three to be assaulted with anything stronger than a phaser set for stun. Emphasize to all teams that the three crew members are likely to be suffering from a noncommunicable racial disease as yet unidentified, and that they haven't turned traitor or anything as ridiculously imaginative as that. When captured, all three are to be taken directly to Sick Bay for treatment."

"Yes, sir." Talliflores operated instruments. "Relaying, sir."

In the absence of further information, Kirk leaned back in the command chair and pondered what had happened so far. In the following silence he had ample time to consider and abandon at least a dozen theories concerning the Caitians' actions, none of which seemed even marginally probable.

His chair intercom buzzed for attention.

"Jim," the voice from the speaker announced, "McCoy here. I've received two more casualties."

"What?" Kirk sat up straight in the chair.

"That's right, two more. From different decks. One thinks he was attacked by Lieutenant M'ress. The other identifies his attacker as Ensign M'viore."

"M'viore, too." Kirk felt dazed. "Bones, what the hell's going on here?"

"I wish I knew, Jim. Caitians are normally a very controlled people. This is the first incident of its kind that I can recall taking place aboard the *Enterprise* or for that matter any other ship I know of, in which Caitians were involved. It doesn't make any sense."

"I know that already, Bones. What about temporary insanity?"

"Occurring simultaneously in three different personalities? Highly unlikely, Jim. I've been checking their records in the medical computer. All three crew members have a history of perfectly normal health, both mental and physical. Not one of them has ever shown any tendency toward mental instability, let alone all three of them. Sorry, Jim, but it has to be something else."

"Anything we could have brought on board, Bones?" Kirk wondered. "Maybe something that could have contaminated their food, affecting them and no one else?"

"I'll check their diets as best I can, Jim, but it's impossible to know exactly what they've eaten lately, never mind for the past few weeks or months. If it's something they did eat, the responsible substance might have been ingested long ago and is only now manifesting itself. There's only one way to check that out and that's to submit all three of them to a detailed biochemical body analysis, to find out if there *is* a foreign substance affecting their stability."

"To do that, Bones, we have to catch them."

"And that's the immediate problem, Jim. In order to cure them, we've first got to find them."

There were three members in the search party. All had their phasers out and set for stun. Ordinarily that would be enough to give them a quiet confidence, but this situation was different from any in recent memory. Even when the quarry was a member of the ship's crew, at least one had some idea what to expect. This time, no one from the captain on down seemed to have any idea what was happening. All they knew was that they were searching for three Caitian crew members who had possibly gone crazy.

Presently they were combing the recreational forest on Deck Eight, having started from the section where the missing officer M'ress had last been seen. Other security parties were performing similar searches both on this deck and elsewhere on the ship.

"Hasmid," whispered one of the security men to his friend on his left, "I understand that Caitians are supposed to be able to move unheard and unseen through this kind of terrain. Just because it's located in the middle of a starship doesn't mean they can't function as efficiently as they can on the surface of a planet."

"Quiet, Kasuki!" the other responded sharply. "You're makin' me nervous. And this isn't any kind of terrain. It's only the recreation area."

"Shut up, you two!" snapped the officer in charge of the little group.

They were traveling in a line through a particularly dense clump of vegetation. In spite of their attentiveness, they hardly had time to react when the three Caitians hit them simultaneously.

Kirk's chair intercom yammered for attention again. Kirk jabbed the acknowledge button almost viciously. "Kirk here."

"Jim, McCoy again," came the concerned response. "One of our patrolling security details got beaten up. It looks like our

three fugitives have joined together somewhere down on Deck Eight."

"One minute, Bones." Kirk switched over to shipwide frequency. "Attention, all security personnel. All security personnel, this is the captain speaking. Seal off Deck Eight. Shut down all turbolift service to Deck Eight. Personnel on Deck Eight are instructed to continue with normal duties. The three Caitians are apparently now operating together, but they've shown no tendency to perform wanton attacks on individuals, and react violently only if approached.

"If you see any of the three crew members in question, do not attempt to restrain them yourselves. Contact the nearest security team and give details of your sighting." Kirk thought a second, then added, "Use extreme caution when approaching the three Caitians. They have already overpowered one security unit. Henceforth, all security teams will operate in groups of not less than eight per team."

Kirk switched back to the Sick Bay frequency. "Sorry, Bones, but I had to relay some information to Security right away. Go on."

"Jim, there's something else peculiar about this. None of the three Caitians are especially large or strong. The contrary, if anything. Yet they put a whole security team out of commission, a team of personnel whose business is restraining the unruly. The three are all marked up: bruises, scratches, cuts, the works. Ensign Trancas is one of them."

Kirk knew Trancas, a big, burly wrestler type from a slightly high-gravity world. Hardly the sort one would imagine a trio of sylphlike Caitians could overpower, much less beat up.

"They encountered only the three Caitians?" he asked in disbelief, "and they were unable to subdue them?"

"Subdue them! Jim, you ought to see these three. Trancas was in charge of their group. He told me they never had a chance. They thought they had the three fugitives spotted, and approached them with phasers ready. Trancas says they should have beamed them on sight. Instead, when the Caitians showed no sign of aggressiveness, they tried to move them physically. That's when they were jumped, too fast to use their weapons. We know the Caitians are fast, but this

other thing has me confused. Trancas says he tried to wrestle M'ress to the deck and she threw him into a clump of bushes."

"M'ress?" The communications officer had never displayed any unusual strength. "Bones, do the Caitians have some special reserves of energy they can call on at will? Perhaps something we don't know about?"

"I wouldn't think so, Jim. At least, I never heard of any such phenomenon, and the Caitians are a fairly well documented race. They've been members of the Federation long enough for any peculiar abilities to have manifested themselves. I think we're still stuck with our original hypothesis: that something they've eaten has affected their body chemistry. The unusual strength is undoubtedly a byproduct of whatever's affecting them. Whatever they ingested isn't sitting well with them."

"It's not sitting well with me either, Bones. Keep hunting, and let me know the instant you think you might've found the chemical that's causing all the trouble."

"If that's what it is, Jim. Sick Bay out."

"Captain?" Talliflores glanced over from communications. "A new report coming in. From a yeoman Loo. He's certain he spotted Lieutenant M'ress and at least one other Caitian on Deck Six."

"Already? They must have slipped away before we sealed off Deck Eight."

"If anyone could avoid patrols it would be the Caitians, sir." Vedama sounded half apologetic. "With their speed and agility, coupled to a natural talent for self-concealment, they will prove difficult to corner."

"I'm fully aware of the capabilities of Caitian physiology, Mr. Vedama." Kirk's frustration made his reply sound more biting than he intended it to be. "More than I want to be, at the moment." He sighed.

"Mr. Talliflores, redirect security personnel to cover all decks, with particular emphasis on Deck Six."

"Yes, sir." He paused, listening at his headset. "Another report coming in. They didn't slip through unnoticed. They confronted another security patrol under the command of yeoman O'Hyr. They're on their way to Sick Bay now."

Events were becoming more complicated instead of less so, Kirk mused. "All eight of them?"

"All but three, Captain," Talliflores reported. "Yeoman O'Hyr is among them. But Ensigns Suarez, Hilambo, and Chevalier were not injured and are presently in pursuit of the fugitives, having delayed only long enough to report in and check the severity of their companions' injuries."

"So three of them weren't hurt, and the Caitians backed off. Whatever's affecting them hasn't made them omnipotent, then. They haven't suddenly become invincible." He hesitated. "Still, five out of eight put out of commission without so much as capturing one fugitive isn't very encouraging either. But at least no one's been seriously hurt or killed yet."

"True, sir," Arex commented from his position at the navigation-helm. "But they will have phasers now, taken from the assaulted security team."

"Mr. Arex, I'm sure they took phasers from the first trio of security personnel they confronted, and yet they haven't so much as fired to stun anyone. That doesn't make any sense either. If nothing else, the Caitians are acting consistent in their inconsistentness." Kirk stared at the vacant viewscreen, which all too soon would be displaying a picture of Starbase 25.

Probably the base had several Caitians in its complement, which meant that M'ress and her companions had to be captured and treated before anyone from the *Enterprise* could leave the ship. A human might not be affected by whatever had possessed the Caitians, but that didn't rule out the possibility of Kirk or anyone else of another species serving as a carrier. If it *was* some kind of racial malady the Caitians were suffering from, he couldn't risk infecting the Caitians at the starbase. Besides which, the Caitians had to be caught so they could be kept from harming themselves, not to mention other personnel.

"Whatever's affected them hasn't driven them completely crazy, Mr. Arex, or they wouldn't have a thought about employing weapons, not to mention severely injuring anyone else. They've been very careful about that." A new thought occurred to him.

"In fact, their recent movements are a testament to their continued sanity. Have you noticed, Mr. Arex, Mr. Vedama, that the Caitians aren't just traveling in a random pattern to avoid the security teams? They're moving upward through the ship. Why, I can't imagine. But if they persist in their movements, and there's no reason why they shouldn't—at least, none I can hypothesize—then maybe we can make it work to our advantage. The bridge is the one level on the ship where we can isolate them and eliminate any possible chance of escape."

"True but risky, Captain," Vedama pointed out.

Kirk replied tensely. "I have three valuable members of my crew running amok, Lieutenant, and if we can stop them before they severely injure any of their fellows or irrevocably incriminate themselves, I'm going to take a chance or two."

"Captain," Lieutenant Arex noted, "if we permit them to reach the bridge unopposed and they are, as you state, not insane, then surely they will suspect something."

"Not if we're careful not to give them reason to, Lieutenant. All bridge personnel will continue to perform their usual duties, as if nothing is amiss. Mr. Vedama, signal Starbase Twenty-Five and find out what they know about periodic maladies among the Caitians. Give them a detailed breakdown of their aberrant behavior lately, plus personal resumes. See if the medical computer there has any information we might use that's not in our banks. And if there's a Caitian or two serving at the Base, try and contact them directly and explain our problem. Maybe they'll know exactly what's wrong."

"Yes, sir. We are still a considerable distance from the base and there is no deep-space relay between. There will be time between questions and reply," Vedama declared.

"Sick Bay calling bridge," the speaker at Kirk's elbow announced. "McCoy here. The injuries to the five members of the last security team are—"

"Not now, Bones," Kirk interrupted him. "The Caitians are moving upward through the ship. I have a hunch they're going to try and reach the bridge."

"Why would they do that? Surely they have no illusions about taking over the ship!"

"We don't know what they might want, Bones."

"Well if you're fairly sure they're coming there, then I'm coming also. They've already demonstrated they can exercise much more than their usual strength. Several of the injured ensigns are positive they hit at least two of the Caitians with phaser bursts when it seemed they were going to be overpowered. They're convinced that's what drove their attackers off, but they don't understand why the bursts didn't stun them into immobility. All I can guess is that their increased strength may also be coupled to an ability to at least partially withstand a phaser set to stun."

"I'll believe that, Bones, when I fire point-blank at M'ress and don't see her fall on the deck."

"Maybe so, Jim, but I'm going to bring something of my own along. It's more powerful than a phaser stun burst, but no more lethal. Ke'eloveen. It's a general tranquilizer that can be adjusted specifically for several different kinds of mammalian metabolism. It won't take long to concoct a batch gauged specifically for Caitian physiology."

"Sounds promising, Bones. Be glad to have you."

McCoy arrived on the bridge shortly thereafter. He carried a small plastic pistol with a multiple barrel. Walking over to the command chair, he showed it to Kirk, reached into a waist pouch and brought out a handful of tiny transparent darts filled with a thick golden liquid.

"Each dart holds enough ke'eloveen to put out several Caitians, Jim. The pistol can fire four darts together or individually. I hope I have enough time to fire one dart at a time. I can fire a quadruple spread in an emergency, but three darts or more striking the same person would create the danger of overdose reactions."

"I'm hoping—unreasonably—that you won't have to use them, Bones." Kirk found the prospect of facing an attack by three of his crew sobering, where others might have found it ludicrous.

McCoy placed the pistol in a ready position at his waist. "Any indication of where the three are now?"

"No. We haven't had any reports on their whereabouts for some time, Bones. Hopefully a patrol will capture them before they can reach the bridge. If not, we have one advantage: They don't know that we're expecting them here."

"How can you be so sure, Jim? They probably know that you've been receiving reports on their movements. They might assume that you *do* know they're heading here and change their direction accordingly."

"I don't think so, Bones." Kirk leaned forward earnestly. "Everything they've done so far has been with a singlemindedness of purpose."

"So you think there's a method in their madness? That they have some definite goal in mind?" McCoy seemed skeptical. "That doesn't sound like any kind of disease function I ever heard of."

"Bones, they've got to be working toward some end. I admit I don't have much grounds for believing that, but their actions almost hint that they're being controlled by something they're unable to resist, some compulsion they can't fight. I don't think they'll consider that we might be waiting for them, because I don't think that whatever's driving them leaves them much room for that kind of abstract speculation. I just wish I knew what they wanted, and why."

"We'll find out soon enough, Jim." And he added, so softly no one else could hear, "Provided we don't have to kill all three of them." McCoy moved away, leaving Kirk to his own thoughts. He took up a stance near the communications console, checking to make certain the tranquilizer pistol was still in place, ready to be pressed into hurried service.

"Remember," Kirk informed the rest of the bridge personnel, "no one is to make a hostile move or indicate that anything out of the ordinary is taking place unless the Caitians provoke us. If that happens, use your phasers on stun."

A chorus of "ayes" sounded in varying degrees of assurance from around the bridge.

"Anything from Starbase Twenty-Five, Lieutenant Vedama?"

"No, sir. They should have received our communication by now. No doubt they are trying to find something to report to us."

Kirk turned to communications once more. "Talliflores, any new word on the present location of the Caitians?"

"No, sir, nothing. None of the patrolling security teams reports a sighting since the last one identifying them from Deck Six—and no word from any other personnel, although everyone on the ship must be looking out for them."

"They're probably not even halfway to the bridge yet," McCoy commented. "Maybe they changed their minds or their imaginary unknown purpose, and are heading in a different direction."

"Maybe, Bones," Kirk conceded, "but I still—"

The turbolift doors opened abruptly. Everyone on the bridge tensed, then relaxed. It was only a couple of ensigns wearing science department insignia. And also wearing, Kirk noted curiously after starting to turn away, oddly matched blank expressions.

"Bridge—!" he started to shout.

Both technicians fell forward, unconscious. Two Caitians emerged from the lift behind them, moving low and incredibly fast and firing phasers of their own.

"—alert!" Kirk finished, even as he was ducking down in the command chair and reaching for his own sidearm.

The order was hardly necessary, since everyone had heard or seen the two bodies of the technicians falling to the deck in front of the lift. Moving forms and flashing beams of phaser power set for stun filled the bridge. That included the phasers of the Caitians, who still displayed a caution entirely out of keeping with their actions. Several members of the bridge complement were quickly immobilized by the Caitians' surprise attack.

Shielded by the command chair's bulk, Kirk was able to aim a touch better than some of his crew. One blast from his phaser struck Ensign R'leez square in the left side, under her arm. She stumbled—but didn't go down. They had been correct in assuming that whatever was affecting the Caitians had also given their bodies the ability to withstand a low-power phaser burst.

But Kirk couldn't consider increasing the power of any weapons to killing intensity. No one had been killed or

seriously hurt by the rampaging Caitians. Of course, if it appeared that it was going to be a choice between hurting one of the Caitians and letting them take over the bridge . . .

Arex was crouched behind the navigation-helm console firing regularly. Holding a paralyzed left forearm tight against his side, Lieutenant Vedama provided a crossfire from the region of the science station.

One of the Caitians, R'leez again, made a rush for the command chair and Kirk. The Captain fired at the charging ensign, then rolled out of the feline's path. But it was immediately clear she wasn't after him or the command chair. She rushed past Kirk, ignoring him as she headed for the helm controls.

Arex caught her with another phaser burst. She staggered but again somehow managed to keep her feet. She was almost on top of the console and its protective, tripedal operator when she unexpectedly collapsed and fell across the helmsman's seat.

Kirk had rolled back behind the command chair, panting. Now he noticed the tiny glint of plastic reflected off the syringe-dart sticking out of the Caitian's back. McCoy had shot her with one of his tranquilizer darts.

Then something knocked him aside, moving at incredible speed. It was Ensign M'viore, the other Caitian who had arrived in the lift.

"Bones! Fire, Bones!"

Why didn't he fire?

M'viore leaped for the controls, and Arex emerged to meet her. The Edoan threw three arms around her, wrestled her off. His additional arm prevented her from dealing with him as easily as she and her companions had dealt with the members of the various security teams. Spitting and clawing while a silent Arex held on desperately, she tumbled to the deck on top of him.

"Bones!" Kirk looked around frantically for the doctor. Then he saw why McCoy hadn't fired at M'viore and why he didn't answer now. McCoy was lying sprawled on the deck, stunned by a burst from one of the Caitians' phasers.

Half crawling, half stumbling, Kirk ran to his side, picked up the half-loaded tranquilizer gun. Arex and M'viore rolled over twice before the Caitian came up on top and raised her claws for a swing at the exhausted navigator's face. Vedama and Talliflores hunted for a clear shot at her.

Kirk turned, aimed the unfamiliar but simple device, and fired. The syringe-dart snicked into M'viore just beneath her upraised right arm. She sat perfectly still for a moment, then rose and glanced at her side uncomprehendingly. For a brief instant the expression on her face was almost normal. Then she crumpled to the deck.

A shaken Arex climbed slowly to his feet. Kirk moved to stand beside him, still holding the dartgun.

"Her reserves of strength were startling, sir," Arex told him, "much in addition to what the reports claimed. It was one thing to listen to them, quite another to experience what they were referring to. I found myself being rapidly overpowered." Long, high whistling sounds—Edoan wheezing—issued from the navigator's mouth.

"I thought she was coming for me," a puzzled Kirk murmured. "She was looking straight at me, and then—something more important seemed to take control of her. She forgot me completely in her rush to get at the helm. R'leez was heading for the helm also."

"That's funny, sir," a puzzled technician replied, from across the bridge, "I thought she was coming after *me*."

"I wonder why the helm as a final destination. Where could they want to go so frantically?"

"We'll find out when they wake up." Arex regarded both limp feline forms thoughtfully.

"I hope so." Kirk glanced around quickly, but the bridge and turbolift were devoid of the one figure he sought. "I wonder where M'ress is?"

The Caitian communications officer was closer than Kirk knew. She was in a dark, dark place. It didn't bother her. She was not subject to claustrophobia, and the faint glow from the pocket light she carried in one hand provided more than enough illumination for her cat eyes to make out her surroundings. It was blissfully quiet where she was working,

but she wasn't calm and relaxed. The pounding of her heart and the raging emotions controlling her kept both her hands and mind moving desperately.

Nurse Chapel arrived with other Sick Bay technicians. The two Caitians and the members of the bridge crew who had been paralyzed by their phasers were carried from the room.

One particular casualty concerned Kirk, not because he was more severely injured than any of the others, but because his invaluable advice would be sorely missed. "How soon before Bones will recover?" he inquired as McCoy was carried off the bridge.

"It doesn't look as if he received the full force of a beam, Captain." Chapel considered the question briefly. "Not very long. In fact, he may be the first one to recover since he only absorbed a glancing blow. He'll recover faster if I give him a countering neuro-drug, but he'll feel the effects twenty-four hours later."

"I need him most in the next twenty-four hours," Kirk told her. "What would Bones say if he was able?"

"To give him the drug," Chapel replied without hesitation.

"Right. Do so. What about the Caitians? I've got to know what's affected them and what M'ress is likely to do on her own, now that her two companions have been caught."

"I understand, sir. I've been working with Dr. McCoy trying to find out, and we've several members of the ship's organic fabrication staff working with us. If anything unusual got into their food, they'll find it. It's slow going, though, backchecking everything that's been processed in, say, the past several weeks. They've found nothing in the way of a foreign substance so far that might be responsible for the trouble."

"Keep them at it, Chapel. Do the best you can. And contact me the moment Bones is conscious."

She smiled. "He'll do that himself, sir."

When the last motionless crew member had been removed and the medical team was on its way down to Sick Bay, Kirk resumed his station at the command chair. Talliflores, Vedama, and himself were the only ones who had escaped the Caitians' assault.

But that wouldn't do, especially not with M'ress still unconfined.

"Lieutenant Talliflores, contact appropriate sections and have them designate on-duty qualified personnel to replace the technicians who were stunned. We need a maximum complement here, in case of any new surprises. Have backups report immediately."

He turned to Vedama. "I wonder why M'ress didn't join her friends in their attack. A third charge might have successfully reached the helm."

"It is possible, Captain," the science officer theorized, "that M'ress might have disagreed with her companions in their approach. Or she might feel different compulsions, have differing motives, and therefore didn't accompany them. Or," and he looked around with concern, "their seemingly well-planned assault on the bridge might only have been a diversion so M'ress could reach some other part of the ship."

"Possible, Lieutenant. Talliflores, give me shipwide channel again."

The communications officer complied and Kirk once more addressed the command chair pickup. "All personnel, this is the Captain speaking.

"Two of the three renesade Caitians have now been tranquilized and are on their way to Sick Bay to receive treatment. Lieutenant M'ress has not been located and presumably is still moving freely about the ship. It is possible that the recent, nonfatal attack on the bridge which you will shortly be hearing rumors of was an attempt to divert our attention from some other deck. Security teams will continue searching on their own levels and all personnel will continue to remain alert for the lieutenant's presence. Thank you."

"If M'ress has any sense left," Vedama commented, "she'll realize that she can't hope to accomplish whatever bizarre intention she and her companions had."

"Relief personnel are on their way up, Captain," Talliflores announced smoothly.

"Good. Hopefully this will all be over soon." Kirk regarded the command chair chronometer. They still had plenty of time to—

The lights went out.

Everyone spent a nerve-wracking couple of seconds in near-total darkness until the self-contained emergency lights cut in, filling the bridge with an eerie, dim glow that was punctuated only by the brilliant but localized illumination of the instrumentation faces and dials.

"I believe, Captain," said Vedama slowly, "that we now know the whereabouts of Lieutenant M'ress."

"Mr. Talliflores," Kirk said crisply, his eyes darting from dark corner to half-hidden bulkhead, "any communications from elsewhere on the ship as to her possible presence?"

"Checking, sir." Talliflores turned to his console. A peculiar expression came over his deeply tanned face. He rapidly adjusted several controls, but these actions served only to deepen his uncertainty.

Eventually he turned back to the command chair. His tone was grim. "Sir, all on-board communications are dead. I can't reach any part of the ship, and if there are incoming calls I'm not picking them up."

"Lieutenant Vedama, try through the science section. See if you can raise anyone," Kirk ordered.

Vedama likewise operated one switch after another before turning sorrowfully to face Kirk. "Sir, not only can't I contact any *one*, I can't contact any *thing*. All links with the main computer have been blocked off."

"So now we know exactly where M'ress is." Kirk found himself slowly inspecting the surrounding walls and the ceiling. "She's got to be in the service crawlway encircling the bridge." He couldn't, despite the seriousness of the situation, keep a touch of admiration from his voice.

"While M'viore and R'leez were attacking the bridge, she was busy cutting controls and connections. We were intentionally kept too busy to use any of the bridge instrumentation, or even to consider that the attack might be diversionary."

His most important remaining question was directed to the only other officer in the room. "Mr. Arex, we've lost communications and computer access. I hope that's all we've lost."

"I follow your meaning, Captain," the Edoan navigator acknowledged. "I am glad to report that we are still on course and maintaining speed. The engineering conduits, which are the most heavily sealed of all bridge-ship linkages, are too strong for her to break."

"Or maybe she doesn't want to break into them," Kirk commented thoughtfully. "If the Caitians' purpose is to take over the ship, they'll want it in operating condition." He leaned forward in the chair, added sharply, "None of this means we can't get reinforcements in here. Lieutenant Vedama, try the turbo-lift."

The science officer nodded, left his station, and moved to the lift. He touched the controls. The doors did not swing aside.

"Nothing, sir. Not even an acknowledgment light on the panel."

"I retract my statement on reinforcements. Apparently Lieutenant M'ress isn't dazed enough not to think things through." He smiled ruefully. "It's always pleasing to see an officer demonstrate such competence. I only wish it were under different circumstances."

"There's still the way she got here, Captain," Vedama pointed out as he moved back to his station. "Up through the service passageways."

Kirk shook his head. "You can bet that when she entered the serviceway around the bridge, Lieutenant, she took care to block off the approach behind her. The Caitians have demonstrated too much thoroughness so far, to forget something so obvious.

"However, the moment someone tries to contact the bridge—if they haven't already—and finds out that its sealed off, they'll guess what's happened and act accordingly. Even if M'ress has used a phaser to melt and seal the door to the serviceway, it won't take long for someone else to get a torch from engineering and cut through.

"And that means," he finished, hefting the tranquilizer gun tightly in one hand, "that if she still expects to accomplish whatever crazy end she has in mind, she'll have to act very soon."

But they waited in silence. There was no sound nor sign of movement from any of the several serviceway hatches lining the interior wall of the bridge.

"Biding her time," Kirk muttered softly, "waiting for some special moment. I wish I knew what was driving her and the other Caitians to do this."

A nervous Talliflores suddenly voiced an unspoken concern. "Sir, what about our life-support systems? Couldn't she take over by interrupting our air supply?"

Kirk replied just a smidgen more confidently than he felt. "I've already thought of that, Lieutenant. She could cut our atmosphere, but I don't know if she could restore it for her own use. But M'ress is no engineer. I don't think she could modulate the air supply just enough to knock us out, and I don't believe she'd chance killing us. That would be counter to all their actions thus far. No, I think she'll try and take the bridge without doing anything so drastic."

"I admit they haven't killed anyone so far, sir," Talliflores conceded, "but if M'ress is pressed for time and feels someone breaking in behind her, into the serviceway—I just wish I knew why they're doing this!"

"Easy, Lieutenant," Kirk urged, trying to relax the officer. "If we knew that, I think we'd have the answers to all our questions."

"If you're right, sir," Talliflores mused, "why wait here for her to attack us? She's had the element of surprise with her ever since this business began."

"How do you propose to take it away from her?" Kirk could see along the lieutenant's intended path and didn't like the option it presented. At the same time, Talliflores was quite correct. Kirk didn't see how he could object to it.

The communications officer indicated a nearby service hatch. "She could be anywhere around or above us, sir. There are several entrances onto the bridge from the serviceway. She could be right here next to communications, or waiting by that one." He pointed to the hatch beneath the main viewscreen. "But she can't be behind all of them at once.

"If one of us could get through a hatch, armed with a phaser and in close quarters, he could probably hold her off

despite her speed and added strength. Even an agile Caitian needs room to maneuver. One of us could keep her busy while another cut through the sealed downway to go for help. We might even surprise her enough to overpower her before she could react."

"You saw what little effect phasers had on ensigns M'viore and R'leez, Lieutenant. Each of them took two or three bursts and still didn't go down."

"I know that, sir," Talliflores argued, "but it did slow them down. If one of us used a phaser and another was ready nearby with the tranquilizers—"

Kirk was emphatic. "Absolutely not, Lieutenant. Your idea has merit, but . . . no. Keeping the tranquilizers ready right here is one of our two remaining methods to insure that the bridge is protected."

"The other?" inquired the lieutenant.

Kirk hesitated, finally voiced the one thing he'd been fighting to avoid. "In that case, we'll have to set phasers to kill."

VIII

All the Kzinti save one were engaged in setting up the stasis-field nullifier or in supervising its construction. The single exception sat in the far corner of the ready room looking miserable and unhappy as always. But that didn't prevent it from regularly scrutinizing the Federation prisoners. Sulu knew that it was concentrating only indifferently with its rheumy, sensitive eyes. The dangerous attention it was lavishing on them sprang from another organ. The telepath ignored the excitement in the room. It spoke not to its fellows, simply sat and watched and listened with its mind, hoping for unconscious betrayal of useful information from one of the captives.

One of the largest Kzinti spoke a few harsh final words to one of the others, then turned to walk over and study the prisoners. Spock had already singled him out as a leader among the collection of yowling aliens, as much for his bearing and manner as for anything he had said. The gaze the Kzin lavished on the immobile captives was more baleful than that of the other Kzinti. His entire manner hinted at impatience and a natural belligerence he did not even try to suppress.

That was fine with Spock. He preferred a direct confrontation to the subtle spying of the telepathic weakling hunched in the background.

Eyes darting rapidly from one to the next, the big Kzin examined them each in turn. Directing his words to Sulu, he spoke. His standard English was comprehensible enough, though pushed out in a rough, raspy voice, as if the Kzin were speaking with a mouthful of pebbles. The implied threat and harshness of his tone needed no clarification.

"I am Chuft-Captain. You will identify yourselves."

So much for diplomatic courtesy, Spock mused. Well, realistically they could expect nothing better.

Taking his cue from what the first officer had said before, Sulu spoke up as if it were natural for him to be in command. "Lieutenant Sulu of the Federation starship *Enterprise*." He gestured with his head toward his companions. "This is officer Spock."

Chuft-Captain appeared to find nothing unusual in Sulu's failure to identify Uhura. He regarded her once, only long enough to assure himself that she was female, and then dismissed her presence as if she did not exist.

Spock, however, was evidently deserving of somewhat more attention. "You are a Vulcan," declared the Kzin, contempt dripping from every word. "I feel no pressing need to converse with an eater of roots and leaves."

One eyebrow rose slightly, but Spock didn't reply to the taunt. If Chuft-Captain was trying to assure himself of Spock's placidity, the first officer wasn't going to do anything to counter that impression.

Apparently satisfied, the Kzin commander turned back to Sulu. "Humans are at least omnivorous," he growled with the air of one making a major concession. "You are prisoners aboard the privateer *Traitor's Claw*, a stolen police vessel."

Sulu had a questioning response ready, but having delivered himself of this information, Chuft-Captain showed no inclination to pursue the conversation. Instead, he turned away from the captives.

His subordinates had almost finished the basic assembly of the nullifier and were beginning to place ancillary instrumentation into the complex framework. As the odd-shaped device took shape, the various members of the Kzin crew displayed increasing excitement.

One Kzin took no part in the construction of the stasis-field nullifier. His attention was reserved solely for the stasis box itself. It rested on the far end of the huge central table. Even with the former owners of the box secured within the police-web field, the guard showed no sign of relaxing his vigilance.

If the Kzin commander was reluctant to converse, then it was up to Sulu to persuade him. "Stealing must be a habit with you. The police vessel . . . *two* stasis boxes . . ." The

helmsman managed to sound impressively contemptuous himself.

Chuft-Captain spun to face him. Since contempt and insult was a normal component of Kzinti communication, Sulu's manner had no effect on him at all.

"Both boxes are the rightful property of Kzin. One we found was empty. We will soon see about the one your trespassing archeologists found. Yes, we knew of those on Gruyakin—and of the box. We intercepted one of their broadcasts, you see." He looked proud. "We did not know of the box until they contacted your ship.

"Rather than assault the entire installation—an attack which would no doubt have been successful but difficult to conceal—we waited for the box to be transported off the planet. Little could we hope that only one man and two others would be sent to recover it. With that known, we hastily arranged this trap. Your disappearance," he added matter-of-factly, "will be much simpler to disguise. As for the second box," and he gestured at the glowing cube on the table, "it is rightfully the property of Kzin."

"What's all this garbage about trespassing and Kzin property?" Sulu sounded outraged. "Gruyakin is an open system."

"A system long claimed by Kzin," snapped an imperious Chuft-Captain.

"The Kzinti make it a habit to claim half the planets in the galaxy," sniffed Sulu. "It's one thing to stake a claim, another to prove rightful ownership. Saying Gruyakin belongs to Kzin is not the same thing as owning it."

"Both boxes are the property of Kzin!" Chuft-Captain's idea of rational debate apparently consisted of stating that which he believed over and over again, as if his claim would gain validity through force of repetition.

"The stasis box we found some time ago was empty," he explained, "but it served well as bait to draw you here. Now we await the inheritance rightfully ours." He gestured at the box, evidently enjoying himself. "The Slavers possessed weapons that could devastate a civilization. If the gods are with us, there will be one such weapon in that box."

Automatically Sulu's eyes traveled to the glowing container they had recovered with so much difficulty. The box itself was harmless as long as one took care—unlike the unfortunate Jaiao Beguin, back on Gruyakin—not to try to open it incorrectly. Sulu fervently wished that the Kzinti stasis nullifier wouldn't work properly. It would be a pleasure to watch the box's defensive system promptly envelop every member of the Kzinti crew in a silvery stasis field of their own.

Across the room, the Kzinti telepath frowned. Let him. Sulu grinned viciously. They had nothing else to threaten him with.

However, judging from the expertise with which the Kzinti technicians were assembling their own nullifier, Sulu's hope was wishful thinking at best. Again he could only glance at the box and pray that its contents proved as innocuous as its exterior.

Sulu had already assumed an aggressive, angry pose. Might as well maintain it. He continued to lace his comments with contempt. "The Kzinti fought four wars with humankind and lost them all," he declared. "The last one was two hundred years ago. It seems that you haven't learned a thing since."

That touched a nerve. A violent howl rattled the interior of the ship. It was as brief as it was extreme. Aware that he had been provoked beyond control, Chuft-Captain quickly bit off the roar, though it took him several moments longer to regain his composure.

When he finally, dangerously responded, his comments were phrased almost carelessly. "Guard your speech, man. None of my crew has ever tasted human meat as did our ancestors. We would welcome the opportunity."

Belligerence had its place. So did common sense. Realizing he had pushed Chuft-Captain too far, Sulu refrained from responding. The Kzin's threat was not made idly. There was nothing to be gained by advancing the time of their death. While they lived there was always the chance, however faint it seemed at the moment, of recovering or at least destroying the stasis box and its unknown contents. While their present status mitigated against that, they could do even less from inside someone's stewpot.

"Always," Chuft-Captain was saying, "you and your Federation have had superior equipment and technology.

We've sought a weapon for a long time which would enable us to defeat you at last."

Sulu jumped on that. "So much for your story about being a privateer. You've just declared that you're really working for the government of Kzin."

One of the other Kzinti, possibly an intermediate officer, looked up from the work proceeding at the table to snarl at Chuft-Captain, who growled back.

"You are presumptuous," he rumbled at Sulu. "All records will show that the *Traitor's Claw* is a stolen police ship. If we are captured, the Highest of Kzin will repudiate us." He smiled, showing sharp white teeth. "No matter what happens, no one except you could possibly prove that this is anything but an illegal privateer crew. And you will not be alive to offer any evidence against us."

A low growling interrupted him. The Kzinti were stepping back from the now-completed nullifier.

Chuft-Captain snarled a reply, started toward the table. He glanced back with a final word for Sulu. "If we succeed and are not captured or intercepted, you will be meat for our tables."

There was an exchange of grumbles and gestures. A couple of the Kzin technicians made some last-minute adjustments to the nullifier. When everyone had stepped clear, the engineer in charge pulled a single switch.

The mood in the room, among captives as well as Kzinti, was one of anticipation mixed with caution. While the stasis nullifier looked efficient and the Kzinti had clearly taken every precaution with its construction and design to insure that it would operate exactly as intended, no one could predict with one hundred percent certainty exactly what a stasis box might do in any situation. For example, it might turn out to be a very intricate Slaver booby trap designed to look like a stasis box.

These fears were overcome by fascination as the nullifier acted on the box. As the nullifying field strengthened, so did the blue aura surrounding the mirror-surfaced cube. Abruptly, the box flared with a light so bright that the Kzinti had to shield their eyes and the prisoners shut theirs lightly.

The powerful flash lasted only an instant, faded as quickly as it had appeared. In its place rested an unremarkable-looking metal box devoid of its original blue halo. Chuft-Captain gestured curtly.

In response, one of the low-ranking Kzinti approached the table. He eyed the box warily. This was a duty he would have preferred to avoid, but under direct order from Chuft-Captain such a thing was unthinkable.

Very carefully, very slowly, he pushed the metal lid up and back. Nothing erupted from the box to shatter its opener or anyone else. No stasis field appeared to freeze the Kzin in time for the next billion years. For all the reaction its opening produced, the box might as well have been made of plastic in the *Enterprise*'s nonorganic fabrication section.

As soon as it was evident that nothing dangerous was going to happen, Chuft-Captain shouldered his crew out of the way in his eagerness to peer into the box. He reached the table, looked into the box . . . and stood, staring quietly.

Sulu, Spock, and Uhura all watched closely—the two humans with apprehension, Spock with an intense curiosity.

Chuft-Captain reached into the box and withdrew an object. It was small and pulsed with an inner light of its own. Sulu stared at the form, which was vaguely reptilian in outline and somehow conveyed the impression of considerable size. He blinked. The "size" was a mental suggestion, built into the shape. The glowing object was as small as ever.

A certain amount of awe came into Sulu's voice. "Could that be a solid simuhologram of a Slaver?"

"If so," Spock whispered back to him without taking his eyes off the object as Chuft-Captain set it on the table, "it is the first representation of a Slaver ever discovered. An important historical find."

Again Chuft-Captain reached into the stasis box. This time he drew out a small square of what was unmistakably raw meat. It was wrapped in a peculiar, nonplastic transparent substance. Chuft-Captain examined it, turning it over in his fingers, and spoke to several other Kzinti. They appeared to agree with him as to its identification.

"It looks like fresh meat," Uhura murmured won-deringly. "Over a billion years in that box, and it looks *fresh*. I wonder what it's doing in there."

"It may have been left inside accidentally," theorized Spock. "Or perhaps whoever placed it inside intended to come back shortly and reopen the box, and left itself a fresh snack."

Uhura glanced sharply—as sharply as she could, restrained as she was by the police web—at the *Enterprise*'s first officer, but there was no hint of humor in his expression and had been none in his words.

Chuft-Captain set the little cube of meat down next to the solid simuhologram, which might or might not be a portrait of a Slaver. Sulu thought he put the meat aside a little reluctantly. He could understand that the possibility of tasting billion-year-old meat was very tempting to a carnivore. But Chuft-Captain was not so foolish as to consume an alien substance without ample pretesting. That was a pity. If they were lucky, it might have poisoned him.

Across the room, the telepath frowned again.

Anyway, more important revelations were at hand. Suddenly Chuft-Captain bore a look of great excitement. This time his hands fairly swooped down into the box. They emerged like a hawk with a kill in its claws.

What the Kzin commander withdrew resembled nothing organic, however. It consisted of a silver-surfaced bubble some seventeen centimeters in diameter. Attached to it was a heavy pistol grip. In form it was awkwardly made, and though not designed for human or Kzinti hands, it was unmistakable as to purpose and function.

A slot ran down one side of the hand—or claw, or tentacle, or who knew what—grip. Sulu could make out six settings notched along the slot. Beside each setting were markings in an unfamiliar script. A small toggle ran the length of the slot. At present it was at the slot's topmost setting.

Wordlessly, an enthused Chuft-Captain turned the device over and over in his hands. Anticipation spread rapidly among the other Kzinti as they realized what Chuft-Captain might be holding. They growled and snarled with animation, acting like

a bunch of schoolchildren at vacation time, sounding like a section of a Federation zoo.

It was a deceptive demonstration. Their unrestrained enthusiasm masked their natural viciousness. Chuft-Captain turned, using the object to threaten the prisoners.

"Nothing like this has ever been found before in a stasis box. It can only be a weapon. It *must* be a weapon. A Slaver weapon! And we of Kzin are the only ones who have it. Look close at it, human!" He walked up to the police web, shook the device almost under Sulu's nose. "This may mean the end of your flatulent Federation of pacifists and root-eaters!" He turned, walked back to display the device to the rest of the curious group.

"Is he right, Mr. Spock? Could he possibly—be right?" Sulu's voice had fallen to a worried whisper.

"I fear it is very possible, Lieutenant," the first officer replied. Then he added a note of caution. "However, I do not as yet see any solid reason to share Chuft-Captain's assurance. Certainly the device *looks* like a weapon. Yet we know so little of Slaver physiology and technology. It may not be a weapon but something else entirely.

"I find little comfort in that, however," he added. "Given the design of the device, even allowing for alien vagaries of technology I must—" He slipped sideways a little, then righted himself.

Sulu and Uhura moved, half stumbling, before recovering their balance. They found they could now move from the waist up. Their arms moved slowly, as long-frozen muscles struggled to obey mental orders.

"They have relaxed the police web," Spock noted aloud. "Preparatory to doing something unpleasant with us, no doubt. Switch on your translators."

The three officers, their hands now free, activated the tiny devices at their waists. Now they could understand the Kzinti without having to rely on the obsidian-edged English of Chuft-Captain.

The Kzin commander was still speaking to several members of his crew. "Have the humans moved to the surface. Be sure

they are secured there in the police web. We will utilize them to test the weapon."

"Yes, Chuft-Captain." That response from one of the other Kzinti, another subofficer. He executed an odd sort of salute, then departed. Probably, Sulu thought, to locate a suitable place above for the . . . demonstration.

Several other Kzinti prepared to leave with Chuft-Captain. That worthy paused. For the first time since Sulu had regained consciousness, he saw Chuft-Captain talking to the forgotten member of the crew. Scratching at the scraggly, drooping whiskers on his face, the Kzin telepath gazed up at his commander sadly.

"You have had time to observe the aliens," Chuft-Captain said to him. "Can you read their minds?"

The telepath's voice matched his pitiable appearance. It had none of the power or strength of his brother Kzinti. Its most distinguishing characteristic was a distinct whine.

"I can read the one called Sulu with difficulty, Chuft-Captain. The other human is only a female. Consequently I have not wasted my efforts on her." Chuft-Captain made a grunting sound to indicate he understood. "The third is a pacifistic herbivore." The whine was augmented by pleading. "Surely you would not force me to delve into such a brain!"

"If it is necessary," was the Kzin commander's brutal reply. "I do realize that you need time to recover from each effort at probing." That was as far as Chuft-Captain could go toward expressing concern for a fellow creature. The telepath did not seem very grateful for it.

"Prepare to move them to the surface." At this order from Chuft-Captain, the remaining Kzinti spread out and drew phasers. One Kzin moved to a nearby wall panel and touched a control. The remainder of the police web deactivated.

Several moments passed while the prisoners were permitted to exercise their cramped leg muscles. Under Chuft-Captain's direction they were surrounded by the armed Kzinti and marched back out the way they had entered. Other Kzinti rolled up the police web and carried it behind, along with a portable power unit and set of remote controls.

There was a wait at the lock while the Kzinti donned their suit armor and the prisoners were permitted to reactivate their life-support belts. Then in small groups they passed via the lock to the icy ground outside.

Once more Spock studied the terrain, only now it was with different thoughts than the ones which had run through his mind when they had first arrived on this world of Beta Lyrae. Pressure ridging and earth movements had broken and buckled the ice plain. If they had an opportunity to break free of their captors, they had ample cover to run to.

After setting up the police web, most of the Kzinti returned to the ship. That left only Chuft-Captain, Telepath, and two others. Apparently the Kzinti felt confident of their ability to control their prisoners. And why shouldn't they? There was really only the human Sulu to watch. The root-eater and the female animal could be ignored.

Chuft-Captain responded to a buzz in his helmet. "Yes?"

A raspy voice sounded over the suit intercom from inside the *Traitor's Claw*. "Chuft-Captain, chemistry has finished analyzing the meat that was in the stasis box. The wrapping is composed of an unknown polymer of metal-ceramic. The meat itself is fully protoplasmic and is poisonous to Kzinkind."

That last was disappointing. Chuft-Captain glanced down at the hoped-for Slaver weapon, inspected the silvery bubble shape thoughtfully. "What of the simulacrum?"

The response came this time not from the ship but from one of the suited figures standing next to the commander. "The human Sulu," the telepath said, "believes it to be a three-dimensional representation of an actual Slaver."

Sulu was startled. He had almost forgotten the presence of the telepath. It was the first time the ragged-looking Kzin had actually given proof that it could read their thoughts. The helmsman found it gave him an uncomfortable, dirty feeling, as if someone was rummaging with impunity through his private possessions. All he could do was glare menacingly at the telepath.

"I agree with the human's assessment." Chuft-Captain was recalling the shape of the simuhologram, the impression of

size and strength that radiated from it. "It would have made a worthy foe. Secure the prisoners."

Helplessly Sulu, Uhura, and Spock watched as the police web was unrolled, charged, and activated. The test completed, the web was turned off until the three captives were standing on it. Then it was switched on again and all three officers found themselves immobilized once more.

Meanwhile, Chuft-Captain had walked to a nearby rise of ice and rock. He raised the silvery device. It took him several clumsy tries to pull the trigger, since the grip wasn't designed to fit his hand.

Nothing happened.

"Perhaps the small toggle," one of the watching Kzinti suggested.

Chuft-Captain nodded brusquely, moved the toggle in the handle slot down toward the first notch and its untranslatable hieroglyphs. The toggle slid easily and freely, slipped into place as though just lubricated. But as soon as the toggle slipped home, the device started to twist in his hand as if it were something alive. Chuft-Captain made a startled sound halfway between a hiss and a snarl. The other Kzinti and the three captives were equally surprised.

To his credit, Chuft-Captain did not drop the device. The distorting writhing soon stopped. The silvery sphere had vanished. In its place, attached to the same unchanged hand grip, was a small parabolic mirror with a silvery knob located at its focal point. A series of markings with little toggle switches of their own ran across the back of the mirror's surface.

After a brief examination of the device's unexpected new configuration, Chuft-Captain aimed it at the horizon and pulled the trigger set in the hand grip. Again nothing happened. He lowered his aim until he was pointing the mirror at the ground in front of him and held the trigger down. There was no hint of radiation or any sign that the device was doing anything at all.

Snarling in frustration, the Kzinti commander raised the device until the mirror was centered directly on Sulu. Uhura made a shocked sound. Spock didn't say a word.

The helmsman stood quietly, assumed a resigned, outwardly unaffected expression. Chuft-Captain held the trigger down again. There was still no indication that the device was performing any kind of function. Perhaps, Chuft-Captain thought, the device was acting in some fashion not readily visible.

"Telepath," he asked, still holdine the trigger down and centering it on Sulu, "am I not affecting him at all? Is the life-support belt interfering?"

Concentrating hysterically, Telepath looked more than normally miserable. Uhura almost managed to feel sympathy for the poor creature. He had not wished his talent on himself.

"No, Chuft-Captain," Telepath reported, a bit too loudly, a touch too fast. "He hears a faint whine but feels no ill effect. There is a vibration in the material of his metal accoutrements but—"

Telepath winced suddenly as if struck by a solid blow, and reeled backward several steps. When he recovered, he stared wild-eyed and pleadingly at his commander. "Chuft-Captain, he is too alien. He makes me taste yellow root munched between flat teeth. I am made sick, Chuft-Captain. Please!"

"You may stop—for now," the Kzin commander informed him. Grateful beyond words, the telepath turned away and was ill inside his suit. "Be glad you need not read the Vulcan's mind."

Looking closely at the parabolic mirror and the settings on its obverse, Chuft-Captain rumbled musingly to himself and his subordinates, "It may be a communications device of some kind. Or perhaps the vibrations it produces are designed to adversely affect members of a race now extinct. Another setting, perhaps."

With a thick furry finger he shifted the hand grip toggle down to the next setting. This time he didn't jump as the device blurred and curled like a ghost python in his hand. The parabolic mirror metamorphosed into a backward-facing screen arrangement with a small lens facing forward. Several knobs were set around the entire assemblage.

Again Chuft-Captain pointed the front of the device at Sulu and pressed the trigger. Again the helmsman displayed no

reaction. But the device did. The screen lit softly to show Sulu standing on the police web.

Chuft-Captain experimented with the knobs on the back of the screen and below it. One touch brought a good, sharp-edged closeup of the stiff-legged human into view. Raising his arm, Chuft-Captain produced a magnified view of the sky above. He lowered the device, stared at it admiringly.

"A good, versatile, portable telescope. They built very well, these Slavers."

"Yet it is of no importance to us," one of the onlooking Kzin crewmen pointed out. "We already have several types of good small telescopes."

Chuft-Captain made a curt gesture of agreement, touched the toggle control once more. Again the device convulsed. When the Kzin commander saw the third configuration, he permitted himself a slight, toothy smile. This one looked much more promising. Set into the handle and trigger grip was a long metallic tube. Several moldings and protrusions blistered the sides of the tube, which ended in a small, thick lens.

Following his previous pattern, Chuft-Captain aimed the end of the tube at Sulu. At the last moment he shifted it slightly to one side before pulling the trigger.

A dense red beam of coherent light emerged from the lens. It contacted the ground just to the right of Sulu's feet and the police web. Ice fragments exploded into the thin air and steam boiled upward where the beam struck. Chuft-Captain released the trigger and the beam disappeared. A modest, still-steaming hole showed in the ice where it had struck.

Sulu had not flinched, despite the proximity of the small explosion. Chuft-Captain fired again, the beam moving closer but still avoiding both the helmsman's boots and the police web. Again Sulu didn't move.

The Kzin commander was moved to admit grudgingly, "I give you credit, human. You are not afraid to die."

"I'm never afraid of the familiar," Sulu replied calmly, nodding at the Slaver device. "That's simply a laser, and not much of one at that. The Federation has had more effective weapons for over a hundred years."

Chuft-Captain permitted himself to look annoyed. Rather angrily he adjusted the toggle to a new setting. Once more the device contorted, as solid in its change as a dream before awakening.

It solidified into a short cylinder. A flared aperture of fair size appeared at its far end. Two flat metal projections extended well downward from the near end of the cylinder. They resembled stirrups so closely that Uhura couldn't repress a start of recognition. If the downward-pointed surfaces had been attached to a small saddle, the device would have closely resembled the ostrich saddles she had used as a child.

Chuft-Captain found the device's latest manifestation far less intriguing—or familiar. He bemoaned the lack of a gunsight or anything resembling one while realizing that nothing so lethal had adorned any of the device's previous forms. Nothing for it but to try this new setting and get on with the next.

He pulled the trigger.

Instantly he was shooting backward across the ice in a seated, undoubtedly uncomfortable position. Traveling at a respectable velocity he had to exert all his strength simply to hold on to the device.

The other three Kzinti scrambled to clear a path for the errant Chuft-Captain. One bit of flame from the gushing Slaver whatever-it-had-become washed across the slower-moving telepath. He screamed in pain. Completely out of control, Chuft-Captain shot across the police web, straight at the three imprisoned officers. His force was more than adequate to carry him through the comparatively mild restraint field the web generated.

Unable to dodge, Uhura was struck on her side. The impact was sufficient to overcome the withholding force field. It knocked her off the web. Clear of the web, she rolled over, scrambled to her feet, and sprinted for the nearby *Copernicus*.

Meanwhile, one of the two remaining Kzinti noticed the injured telepath. The scorching exhaust of the Slaver device had ruptured the smaller Kzinti's suit. Scooping up the lighter telepath, the Kzin turned and raced frantically for the lighted tunnel leading to the buried ship. Telepath was howling over

his suit mike, trailing a fog of freezing atmosphere behind him.

"Telepath's suit has been cut," the remaining Kzin called out to Chuft-Captain.

"Never mind that!" The Kzin commander lay just past the police web. Having finally succeeded in shutting off the runaway device, he was climbing slowly and painfully to his feet. He gestured toward the Federation shuttlecraft. "The female is escaping, fool!"

Puzzled, the remaining Kzin's gaze traveled to the sprinting communications officer. "What of it?"

"Idiot!" Chuft-Captain was trying to find his own phaser. "Human females are intelligent!"

The remaining Kzin fought to assess this piece of incredible information. Though he knew it to be true, it was no less difficult for him to cope with. But he was a Kzin warrior. Time enough to muse later. Act *now*.

Drawing his phaser, he aimed it carefully. Uhura had almost reached the shuttlecraft when the stun burst caught her neatly in the small of the back. Her body arced spasmodically; she took another couple of steps and slumped to the ground.

Replacing the phaser at his waist, the Kzin trudged off to pick up Uhura's recumbent form. Meanwhile the Kzin who had thoughtfully carried the injured telepath into the ship was returning, moving at a fast jog.

"What report, Flyer?" asked Chuft-Captain, showing more concern for the neurotic mind reader in the latter's absence than he had previously.

The Kzin called Flyer responded worriedly. "His suit lost considerable pressure before I could get him into the ship, Chuft-Captain. But he will live."

"Good. We will need him later." Chuft-Captain proffered the new configuration of the Slaver device, handling it gingerly. Flyer examined the complex arrangement of struts and tubes.

"Doubtless a personal rocket motor, some form of one-being transportation device. One could place one's feet on the pedal shapes, there, and balance carefully. With practice, one could obtain great individual mobility."

"In any case, it is certainly not a weapon," concluded Chuft-Captain.

The two argued over the precise function of the new setting as the other Kzin returned with Uhura. They broke off their discussion long enough to guard Spock and Sulu while the other warrior placed the still-unconscious communications officer on the police web. He retreated quickly and the web field was restored. Uhura slumped slightly before the field caught her, held her upright.

"Uhura!" Sulu called as best he could with his head pinned. He turned slowly to look at her. "Lieutenant Uhura!" Her eyelids fluttered, finally opened. She stared across at him, recognition that she had failed dawning rapidly.

"Nice try," Sulu attempted to reassure her.

It did not. "I'm slowing down." She sounded bitter. "I used to run the hundred in record time. How long have I been out? Did I miss anything?"

"Not much," Sulu told her. Unexpectedly, he chuckled. "A lot of good they'll get out of that propulsion setting. I wonder how much fur Chuft-Captain lost off his backside, suit armor or no suit armor!"

"We have been fortunate," Spock said more somberly, "that none of the settings thus far employed have revealed anything superior to known Federation technology."

"Thus far. Look." Uhura tried to point, but found that she couldn't, of course. Her arm was once more held tightly motionless by the police web. Sulu and Spock turned to watch the Kzinti again. It appeared that Chuft-Captain had moved the toggle control, because the Slaver device was writhing in his hands for a fifth time.

The new shape was a total surprise. Not only didn't it resemble a weapon, or something familiar like the parabolic mirror or the laser tube, it didn't resemble anything at all. Spock had to blink to assure himself the device had indeed finished changing, because it looked as if it had frozen in the middle of its new transformation, neither complete nor incomplete but some non-Euclidian nebulosity in between.

The shape should not have been. As he watched, it seemed to alter regularly without moving, to twist and curl in and

about itself in a bizarre, topologically impossible fashion. And yet, it possessed the appearance of a solid shape.

"No gun sight," Chuft-Captain murmured softly, revealing a fixation on a single thought. "No evident way to aim it. Still, it must do something." Lifting the device, he pulled the trigger.

Both subordinate Kzinti were staring fixedly at the clump of ice-covered rock Chuft-Captain was aiming at. So none of the three warriors noticed that as soon as their commander pulled the trigger, the yellow glow from the tunnel behind them winked out like a drowned candle.

Uhura nearly fell, then caught herself and stayed motionless. "Mr. Spock, I can move."

"So can I," an excited Sulu whispered, experimentally edging one foot back and forth. "The police web is off."

Spock flexed the fingers of his left hand just enough to make certain he too was no longer trapped. "The fifth setting seems to be some sort of energy absorber. Fascinating. We've had no indication the Slavers possessed anything along such lines."

"Mr. Spock, shouldn't we—?"

Spock cut the helmsman off. "Yes, but in concert. When I give the word, run for the shuttle. Remember to present as irregular a target as possible. You traveled in a straight line, Lieutenant Uhura, and while you cannot outrun a phaser burst there is a chance to avoid one."

"Don't worry," Uhura assured him grimly. She had no intention of being stopped so easily again.

"Ready?" warned Spock. *"Go!"*

Adrenaline substituted for starting blocks as Sulu and Uhura fairly exploded toward the shuttle, twisting, dodging, zigzagging across an imaginary obstacle course. Tired from her previous sprint and still suffering lingering aftereffects of the recent phaser burst she had taken, Uhura fell behind.

Spock wasn't even close. He had chosen a different path toward the shuttle, one involving a slight but critical detour. Before the startled Kzinti could react, the first officer was racing toward them.

By the time their attention shifted from the nonexistent destructive effects of the Slaver device's fifth setting, Spock was on top of Chuft-Captain. The Kzin commander turned a second too late to defend himself. Spock wasn't fooling with anything as subtle as a Vulcan nerve-pinch. Both legs came up as Spock leaped. His full weight was behind them, multiplied by his velocity, as he slammed both feet into the Kzin commander, high up on the feline's rib cage.

Chuft-Captain doubled over as he began falling backward, let out a loud moan, and dropped the device. Landing on one hand and both feet, Spock grabbed the Slaver artifact before it could bounce twice, and was off and racing for the shuttle.

Sulu looked behind him. Three Kzinti were now firing their phasers, one aiming at Spock, the other two at the more distant humans. A rise of broken rock and ice loomed nearby, just to the helmsman's left. Seeing that he wouldn't be able to make the shuttle, he swerved sideways and took shelter behind the hillock.

Uhura tried to follow him but she was too far behind. A burst from one of the phasers caught her again. She stumbled toward the ground, her last conscious thoughts filled with anger more than disappointment.

Clutching the Slaver device tightly in one hand, Spock continued his erratic, weaving course across the icy surface. Phaser beams repeatedly struck the ground where he had been heading only seconds before. But the first officer was still running hard and fast, and the Kzinti were unable to guess which way he would head next.

Deciding that the Vulcan was too far out of range, Flyer moved to aid Chuft-Captain. The commander was still lying on the ice, doubled-up and clutching at his side.

"Chuft-Captain, what happened?"

"I would rather not discuss it," came the sharp but pain-ridden reply. "Help me into the ship."

Flyer helped his commander to his feet. Chuft-Captain winced, nearly fell as he straightened. Flyer said nothing. It was unthinkable to show sympathy.

They started toward the tunnel leading to their ship. As they walked, it became clear to Flyer that Chuft-Captain had

been badly hurt, for he couldn't have walked without help. As the airlock cycled around their suits and Chuft-Captain's painful wheezing sounded in his suit helmet, Flyer was still trying to visualize the unthinkable.

IX

It had been quiet on the bridge for long moments. The emergency lighting remained on, bathing instruments and the four wait-officers in its eerie, subdued glow. Communications with the rest of the ship remained dead, as did computer control. The *Enterprise* was still on course toward Starbase 25, but she was flying blind.

Kirk idly regarded the stun setting on his phaser, resting ominously at his waist. He hefted the tranquilizer pistol firmly. Their phasers would remain set on stun. Lieutenant M'ress and the other captured Caitians were as much a part of his crew, as much personal friends, as anyone else he worked with.

But . . . the ship had to come first. It seemed impossible that the four of them, alerted and expectant, would be unable to overcome a single slim Caitian female. However, everything else that had happened so far had seemed impossible also. With their communications and computer controls out, he couldn't even switch control of the ship to the secondary bridge.

The phaser controls seemed to grow larger in his eyes, the extreme end of the setting beckoning to him hypnotically. But before he would change that, he'd try any alternative. "Lieutenant Talliflores, Lieutenant Arex, if you two would like to try Talliflores's plan, keeping your phasers set on stun and without utilizing the tranquilizer pistol, you have my permission."

"I'd rather have the tranquilizers, sir," responded a doubtful communications officer.

Kirk shook his head emphatically. "Absolutely not."

"We'll try anyway, sir."

"Good luck." Kirk turned to the science station. "Mr. Vedama, if this fails, and Mr. Talliflores and Mr. Arex fail to return . . . set your phaser to kill." He had trouble finishing the sentence.

"Yes, sir," his science officer said solemnly.

Talliflores palmed his phaser, then left the useless communications console to stand next to a ready Arex. "Since we have no idea where she is, sir, we'll try the hatch closest to the accessway leading to the deck below us."

Moving as quietly as possible, Talliflores and the Edoan navigator edged over the service hatch. Kirk kept the tranquilizer gun trained on the hatch as Arex set about undoing the catches. The resultant opening would be large enough for a good-sized human to fit through. The tripedal Arex would find it a tighter squeeze, but Kirk estimated his navigator should also be able to squeeze through into the serviceway beyond.

"Lieutenant Talliflores," he called abruptly, as the two officers were preparing to release the last catch.

"Sir?" Talliflores was lying flat on the deck, working at the hatch cover.

"You'll move to cut through the sealed doorway to the lower decks, if it is sealed. If not, you'll go for help. Lieutenant Arex will cover you."

"But sir, I'd hoped to . . ." Talliflores began.

Kirk cut him off firmly. "Sorry, Lieutenant. Mr. Arex has already tangled with one of the Caitians and come off considerably better than anyone else." He suppressed a smile. "Mr. Arex has the advantage of being half again as dextrous as a human."

"Very well, sir," Talliflores reluctantly replied.

The last catch was released. Carefully the two officers removed the hatch plate. When neither phaser bolt nor squalling Caitian emerged from the opening, Talliflores leaned forward and peered into the dim crawlway beyond. He glanced once back at Kirk, who nodded—there could be no talk on the bridge now, not with the hatch opened. Talliflores crawled through, vanished into the darkness. After a last glance back at Kirk, Arex followed.

It was as silent as a Klingon consulate on Federation Day. Suddenly someone, probably Talliflores, shouted. Muffled yelling and sounds of a struggle followed.

Vedama took a step toward the hatchway. Kirk ordered him back to the science console.

If Arex and Talliflores couldn't overpower or outmaneuver M'ress in the cramped serviceway, sending in the diminutive Vedama would only result in the loss of another officer. Nor could he enter the fray himself and risk losing the tranquilizer pistol, their only proven means of stopping a berserk Caitian.

The hidden battle continued more quietly. Only an occasional curse, grunt, or peculiar low-pitched feminine yowl punctuated the quiet. Once, Kirk thought he heard Talliflores cry out, but he couldn't be sure it wasn't M'ress.

Then it was silent on the bridge again.

Hesitantly, hopefully, Kirk called out. "Mr. Talliflores, Mr. Arex?"

No response.

Sadly, Kirk turned to face Vedama, gestured significantly at the officer's waist. Vedama drew his phaser, made the agonizingly painful adjustment of the setting . . . and sat back to wait.

"Let me take the first shot, Mr. Vedama," Kirk instructed him. "If I miss . . ." He didn't have to finish the directive, and had no desire to.

"Lieutenant M'ress?" He directed his voice to the square black eye of the hatchway. Again, no response. "Lieutenant M'ress, this is the captain. I don't know what you think you're doing, Lieutenant, but whatever you have in mind can't be allowed. Your two companions, M'viore and R'leez, have already been captured and can't help you. You haven't got a chance, Lieutenant."

The black orifice stared back at him mockingly.

He tried a different approach. "Listen, M'ress, I know you're not doing this of your own free will. You've got to realize that yourself. Whatever's compelling you to act this way, I understand. I'm not holding you and the others responsible for your actions. But this has to stop, *now*. You've got to fight whatever's gripping you, M'ress! You've got to break this madness before . . . we have to stop you."

"I . . ."

It was a faint, barely audible sound, and for a second Kirk felt he had imagined it. But a quick glance showed that Vedama had heard, too. It was more a cry than a challenge, and sounded as if it had been forced out against terrific odds.

"What is it, M'ress?" Kirk called eagerly. "I'm listening. Talk to me, talk and fight it."

"I'm angrrry . . . confused. I . . ." and she mumbled something in broken Caitian which Kirk didn't understand. The Caitian had been mixed with English.

". . . can't . . . stop . . . myself," she moaned, as if fighting with her own voice. "Must . . ."

"Must what, M'ress?" Kirk had to keep her talking. "Tell me what you need and maybe something can be worked out."

"Must . . . go home. Go to Cait."

"Your homeworld? But why?" Kirk had felt sure that when the Caitian's purpose had been revealed, it would clear up the rationale for their bizarre behavior. He was wrong. The knowledge only added one more confusing aspect to the whole incident.

"Can't . . . Must go to Cait-rrrr—" Her voice changed, overtones of anger replacing the desperate striving for understanding. "Must go to Cait *now, fast*. Give me contrrol of the ship, Captain. Orr . . . change courrse forr Cait."

Kirk threw Vedama a querulous look, saw that the science officer was equally bemused at the imperious request. "M'ress, we can't possibly go to Cait now. Have you forgotten the Briamos conference? We have to be there on time, to represent the Federation, or the Briamosites will probably align themselves with Klingon. You don't want that to happen, do you, Lieutenant? I know you're not a traitor."

"Must . . . go now to Cait!" It came out a half-order, half-sob. Conflicting desires were tearing M'ress apart.

"You're not being sensible, M'ress," Kirk countered, aware that none of the Caitians had been acting sensibly recently. "It's impossible and you know it. We can't miss the conference. Listen, give yourself up peaceably, right now, and after the conference I give you my word we'll go directly to Cait. You don't even have to give me a reason."

"Captain," Vedama began, "other Starfleet orders—"

"Lieutenant, I have the authority to overrule any subsequent Fleet orders in order to respond to any emergency threatening my ship—barring a Federation-wide danger." He turned back to the open hatchway.

"Did you hear that, Lieutenant?" he asked, raising his voice slightly. "I have the authority to order the *Enterprise* to Cait immediately following the conference's conclusion. I'll put it in the official log, if you want." No response. "Are you willing to bargain, M'ress? Will that satisfy you?"

"Can't . . . help," came the threatening yet pitiable response from somewhere beyond the hatch. "If you will . . . not orrderr us to Cait now, give . . . contrrol to me. Orr . . . I will . . . I *must* . . . take overr yourr brridge."

"You can't do it, M'ress." Kirk sounded more positive than he felt. "I know that you're partially immune, somehow, to phasers set for stun. Lieutenant Vedama's phaser is set to kill. He won't shoot except as a last resort. I'm holding a tranquilizer pistol, M'ress. Dr. McCoy prepared a serum keyed to the Caitian metabolism. That's how we knocked out M'viore and R'leez. The serum will do that to you, too.

"You can't possibly overwhelm two of us from the serviceway and take over the bridge before a security detail finally gets here. They're probably on their way right now, running the turbolift on bypass controls and power, or coming up through the serviceway access below us. They won't have my orders to restrain them, M'ress," he said desperately. "They won't have their phasers set for stun, or wait for me to fire first. Don't you see? You can't possibly win. There's no way you can take over the bridge."

"Tell . . . that to . . . Arrex and . . . Talliflorres," came the half-taunting, half-sorrowful reply.

"Captain?"

"Just a minute, Mr. Vedama. Lieutenant M'ress, let me think about your demand. Give me just a minute."

"Don't want to . . . hurrt anyone," M'ress insisted, sounding as if she meant it. "But *must* go to . . . Cait . . . *now!*"

"What is it, Vedama?" Kirk whispered.

"I've bypassed normal communications and computer network, sir," he murmured tightly. "We have intership

communications again. Several sections are calling steadily, trying to contact us. Several sound frantic."

"That's not surprising. If we can just stall her a little longer . . . Give me Security."

"Try your chair pickup, sir."

Kirk directed his voice toward the command chair pickup, his gaze never leaving the gaping hatchway. "Security, this is the bridge."

"Yeoman Dickerson here, Captain. It's good to hear from you. What's going on up there?"

"Lieutenant Talliflores and Lieutenant Arex have been stunned. Mr. Vedama and I are holding off Lieutenant M'ress. She's in the serviceway encircling the bridge. You must try to break through the serviceway door or come up the turbolift. She's cut all bridge power. Under no condition, except as a last resort to preserve the integrity of the ship, is anyone to use a phaser set higher than stun. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir, but—"

"Is that understood, mister?"

"Yes, sir." The voice sounded disappointed, but the acknowledgment sent a wave of relief over Kirk.

"Then get moving, Yeoman. Bridge out." He glanced quickly back at Vedama. "Who else is calling, Lieutenant?"

"Sick Bay has priority, sir."

"Put them through."

A pause, then an anxious familiar voice sounded over the chair speaker. "Jim, are you all right? Jim?"

"I'm okay, Bones. So far. M'ress has us pinned down here, but I think we have her trapped as well. What's been happening at your end?"

"Jim, we've been doing frantic research on Caitian disorders. That's been part of the problem."

Kirk frowned. "I don't think I understand, Bones."

"We've been looking for a disease, a physical malady, something rare and unusual. It took a while for me to realize that while the Caitians' behavior might be extreme, it might have a perfectly normal cause."

"That sounds contradictory, Bones."

"Jim, I think I know what's causing them to act the way they have. Has it occurred to you that all the seriously injured personnel—security and otherwise—have been men? Or rather, male? And that the women who were part of the eight-person security team that was assaulted were incapacitated but not harmed? Listen to this, Jim."

There came a pause, and then a horrible screeching and yowling sounded over the speaker. It was a frantic, uncontrolled din, and yet somehow it seemed sorrowful rather than ferocious.

"Bones, what the—?"

"That's M'viore and R'leez, Jim," came McCoy's reply. They're both conscious again. I've got them both strapped down so they won't hurt themselves—or anyone else. Needed extra straps to keep them from breaking free. Jim, the level of Caitian-equivalent adrenaline in their blood is unbelievable! But what's most important is their Caitrogen hormone level. Absolutely crazy. Sent my diagnostic indicators right off the graphs.

"I've given them the moderating dosage necessary to bring their hormone levels back to normal . . . the dosage they should have received normally. They should both be sensible in a couple of hours."

"Dosage they should have received?" Kirk thought he saw motion at the hatchway, but decided he was imagining things. The tension had grown worse with the passing minutes. "What are you talking about, Bones?"

"When we couldn't find anything physically wrong with them, I tried to imagine what could induce a Caitian to go insane like they did. Caitians usually control their emotions fairly well. I thought about drugs, the presence of certain stimulants in their food, maybe even accidental self-hypnotism. But the chemists couldn't find anything foreign in their recent menus.

"That's when it occurred to me that maybe they weren't ingesting something they regularly took, instead of having eaten something they shouldn't have. The chemists were put off because their blood tested normal, except for the

excessive hormone level. I tied that in with the suddenly realized fact that all the badly injured security personnel had been male, Jim. Couple that with the fact that our three Caitians all happen to be female—"

A definite shadow appeared at the hatchway. Kirk fired refiexively. The syringe-dart struck metal somewhere beyond the blackness and the shadow vanished.

"Neither of the ensigns is coherent enough to give me any help, but their behavior fits what I discovered in the limited Caitian biology references in the medical records. They take biannual doses of a drug called pheraligen, which moderates their body's production of Caitrogen. And that in turn suppresses the otherwise extreme reactions Caitian females used to have at this time of the year."

"This time of year . . ." Kirk finally had the answer to the mystery.

"Apparently," McCoy continued, "the pheraligen is programmed into their diets in innocuous-tasting supplements, Jim. They're so used to receiving it without having to think about it, they didn't realize what was happening to them. Since the regimen is in no way a treatment for a disorder, I didn't know about it. Programming it becomes the responsibility of the science life-support section, not medical."

Vedama had turned pale. "My department, Captain, my department. But I've never had to—"

"And Spock isn't here to check on it. Probably the facts are resting right in his daily work-log: *Caitian female personnel, semiannual pheraligen dose due.* So that's why they've been acting the way they have."

"Right, Jim. All it takes is a standard dose of pheraligen to counter the excessive hormone production and they'll return to normal."

"That's all very well and good for M'viore and R'leez, Bones, but what am I going to do with M'ress?"

A phaser bolt erupted from the upper right-hand corner of the hatch opening. Aimed with difficulty, it struck several centimeters from Kirk's right foot. Nerves tingling from the nearness of the beam, he abandoned the command chair and

limped around behind it. Vedama crouched lower but didn't abandon the science console.

"Bones, M'ress isn't sensible enough to understand what you've been saying, though I think she's trying to. She can't control herself, and I think maybe desperation's making her frustrated enough to kill. She wants to take over the bridge and change course for Cait."

"Not surprising, Jim," came McCoy's voice over the open bridge speakers. "She's only reacting the way primitive Caitian physiology's instructing her to, and there are no Caitian males on board. If there were, none of this trouble would have happened. That's why our security personnel were attacked, and then not killed. Even with their hormone level driving them insensible, they still retained enough knowledge of who they were to stop before committing murder. The injuries to our security teams were inflicted out of frustration, not malice. You've got to get one of those tranquilizer darts in her."

A second phaser burst poured from the hatchway. This time Kirk couldn't be sure the beam was still set to stun.

"She's becoming hysterical, Bones!" Kirk tried to spot the elusive lieutenant, saw only black in the hatchway opening. "She doesn't dare use too powerful a setting, though. If she damages the controls, she won't be able to try turning us toward Cait."

"Captain, if you've no objection . . ."

"What's that? Who's speaking? Scotty, is that you?"

"Aye, Captain. I've got an idea I've been working on since Dr. McCoy found out what was wrong with the two ensigns. With your permission, I'd like to give it a try. I know this business isn't my department, but—"

Kirk ducked as a phaser beam scored the top of the command chair. "Anything nonlethal, you've got my permission, Scotty. Go ahead with it."

Kirk didn't know how long they could continue to stall M'ress. In between useless exchanges of phaser fire he conjured up every argument he could think of. None of them would have done any good, save for the fact that M'ress retained just enough sanity and sense to respond to them. So she listened

and reacted, even if her comments were not particularly sensible.

Of course, Kirk knew he might be deluding himself in thinking that he was keeping her mind busy. She might be waiting for him to grow so involved in his chatter that he would drop his guard and allow her a reasonable charge at the command chair. Eventually, he knew, she would have to come to the inevitable decision that he wasn't going to voluntarily relinquish control of the ship, and that her time was running out.

That moment came sooner than she expected or Kirk had hoped.

A hissing noise reached the bridge. It came from somewhere beyond the open hatchway.

"Captain," M'ress yowled, "call . . . them off. Tell them to . . . stop trrying to cut . . . in."

"I can't," he lied. "They're operating independently of my orders, M'ress."

Her voice rose unsteadily. "I'll use my . . . phaserr on the firrst one who comes thrrough the opening!"

"Lieutenant, you haven't killed anyone yet! Fight what's controlling your mind. We know what your trouble is now!"

Not surprisingly, M'ress refused to listen.

There sounded a sharp *spang* of stressed metal giving way. Any second Kirk expected to hear the slight, deadly hum of M'ress's phaser as she made good her threat on whoever was coming through the opened serviceway.

Instead, he heard a strange yowling from the Caitian unlike anything heard thus far. It was followed by a distinct *phut*, then silence.

A figure started to emerge from the hatchway opening. Kirk raised the tranquilizer pistol, then hesitated. So did Vedama. The figure that stepped into the dim light of the bridge would have caused them to fire instantly, except for the fact that it was carrying its head beneath one arm!

"Scotty! It worked."

"Aye, Captain." The *Enterprise*'s chief engineer looked relieved. He gestured back toward the hatchway. Sounds of

moving feet came from behind it. "Dr. McCoy's inside now. And a whole crew of techs. If the damage M'ress caused isn't too serious, and I dinna think it could be, bridge functions should be"—the regular lights abruptly came back on and Kirk blinked at the bright, familiar illumination—"restored quickly." Scott permitted himself a slight smile of professional pride.

"What about Lieutenant M'ress?"

"Dr. McCoy says she'll be fine, Captain," Scott replied, "as soon as the pheraligen takes effect on her system and she's had a couple of hours' rest." Walking forward, he deposited an object in his right hand on the navigation-helm console. It was a twin to the dart-pistol Kirk still held.

As he approached, Kirk grew conscious of a peculiar, powerful odor emanating from the chief engineer. His nose twitched. Scott noticed it and grinned.

"Strong stuff, Captain. That smell's the only thing that made it work. Dr. McCoy synthesized the appropriate male Caitian pheromones to complement this costume." He indicated the furry, catlike suit he was wearing. I'm not so sure the costume alone would have let me get within shooting range, but the pheromones fooled her—or overpowered her. We only had to distract her for a couple of seconds, long enough for me to get a syringe into her." He gestured at the dart-pistol resting near the helm controls.

Kirk was putting his own weapon down. The crisis was all over, but the tenseness drained slowly from him. "What ever made you think of such a crazy idea, Scotty?"

The engineer looked embarrassed. "From a costume ball I went to, Captain, several years ago. I went dressed as a Fiorellian and a real female Fiorellian mistook me for a male of her species. To complicate matters, *she* was costumed as a human female. So it was doubly disconcertin'."

"I can imagine," agreed Kirk, slowly resuming his position in the command chair.

"Captain?"

Kirk looked over at the science station. "What is it, Mr. Vedama?" When he saw the lieutenant's position, he swiveled fully to face him, frowning. "What's wrong?"

Vedama was standing stiffly before his console, unsmiling. "I hereby present myself for arrest, sir."

"At ease, Lieutenant." Vedama relaxed, but only slightly. "It wasn't your fault. It wasn't anybody's fault, except maybe the Slavers'. They had the poor timing to present us with one of their stasis boxes at a time when Mr. Spock had to be two places at once. I'm sure that by tomorrow or the next day, in routinely checking over his schedule, you would have spotted the instructions to program the pheraligen into the Caitians' diet. It was bad luck and timing that their metabolism chose this particular time to shift into high gear.

"In fact, it's surprising you haven't overlooked more than one thing. You're doing your best, Lieutenant, and so far that's been quite satisfactory. Resume your post."

"Yes, sir." Vedama's salute was crisp.

Scott had slipped out of the suit. "Bloody hot, Captain. I don't understand how the Caitians can stand their own fur."

"They probably wonder, like all naturally furred creatures in the Federation, how we humans can run around almost naked, by their standards."

Kirk stood as several figures emerged from the hatchway. A limp form was passed to one tall medical technician. He handled the comatose M'ress easily. Her eyes were closed tight, arms and legs dangling like pale vines.

"Sick Bay immediately, Ensign," ordered a muffled voice from somewhere behind the hatchway.

"Yes, Doctor," acknowledged the tech, moving toward the turbolift doors.

Kirk was about to tell the ensign that the lift didn't work, when the doors slid aside obediently at the man's request and shut behind him. At the rate they were going, it wouldn't take Scotty's crew long to have the bridge functioning at full efficiency again.

"They'll all be all right, Bones?" he asked the figure emerging from the hatchway.

"I think so, Jim, Except for the mental inconvenience they might suffer for a while."

"How do you mean, Bones?"

McCoy walked over to retrieve first Scott's discarded tranquilizer pistol, then Kirk's. "Consider what they've done, Jim. They've tried to take over the ship. In the process they put a respectable number of their fellow crew members in Sick Bay with assorted scratches and other wounds. Generally they've behaved in a very immature as well as aggressive fashion.

"Of course, they had no control over their actions. Matter of fact, when they come around in a few hours I doubt that any of them, M'ress included, will remember much of what they did. The difficulties will come," he continued after a brief pause, "when their companions tell them what they've been up to.

"That will upset them enough, but it's the reason behind their actions which will trouble them the most. M'ress will stand it better than M'viore and R'leez because she's an officer, but I don't doubt that the two ensigns will take a good deal of kidding about what happened. I think we're going to have to cope with three very embarrassed Caitians."

"But everyone will know," Kirk said, "that they weren't responsible for their actions, that they had no control over the way they were acting."

"Easy to say, Jim, but then *we're* not the ones who have to handle the fact that we lost all composure and intelligence and spent a day acting like, well, like animals."

Kirk turned to the blank viewscreen, thought hard. "I think the Caitians will handle any joking competently, Bones. After all, they can always use the argument that we humans act like animals all the time."

X

Sulu found himself running deeper and deeper into the jumbled landscape, dodging nervously around towering blades of ice, scrambling atop slick-surface boulders to whom the proximity of organic matter was a radical if nonperceived event.

The terrain grew steadily more grotesque in outline, the horizon increasingly tortured. One would have thought two rivers of ice had rushed headlong into one another here, jammed together like massive white wrestlers. Ice and stone pressed and piled over and atop each other to create a chalcedony desert flavored by Bosch. At least the chaotic topography favored Sulu's retreat. No phaser beam stabbed at him from behind. Let the Kzinti follow him if they could—he'd have them ambushing each other.

Sulu turned another ice block half the size of the shuttlecraft, only to see a figure rushing at him. Startled, he tried to back away. Then he recognized the familiar shape and began moving toward it.

"Mr. Spock!" Sulu let out an exhausted but relieved sigh as the first officer neared. "I thought you were one of the Kzinti."

Spock replied simply by holding up the object he carried. "I have the device, Lieutenant."

"Yes, but they've got Uhura. At least, I expect they do. I'm sure I saw her fall before I got out of the open. They've also got subspace radio and have us cut off from the *Copernicus*. If they want to, they can wait for us to starve while they call for help from the nearest Kzinti base."

"No, they cannot," Spock informed him with remarkable self-assurance, "or rather, they will not."

Sulu re-examined the options open to the Kzinti that he had just voiced, and bewilderedly could find no reason why they could not do exactly what he'd claimed. "Why can't they?"

"Because I kicked Chuft-Captain." When Sulu showed no sign of comprehending, the first officer elaborated. "Consider,

Mr. Sulu. Chuft-Captain has been attacked by an herbivorous pacifist, an eater of roots and leaves, one who according to Kzinti tradition not only does not fight, but does not resist. Furthermore, I gave the ultimate insult subsequent to my successful attack, by leaving Chuft-Captain alive." Spock moved to the far corner of the monolith, peered cautiously around it.

"Chuft-Captain's honor is at stake, Lieutenant. Before he can seek outside help he must have personal revenge in order to absolve himself."

"Now I understand, sir. That gives us some time, then." Sulu hesitated, eyeing the first officer intently and with admiration. "You did plan it that way?"

"Of course." Spock seemed surprised that Sulu should think of any other possibility.

"Then as long as you stay free, the Kzinti can't or won't do anything until Chuft-Captain's had his chance to regain his reputation." He looked suddenly concerned. "But they could use Lieutenant Uhura as bait to trade for the Slaver device."

The first officer examined the enigmatic construction he held. "That is so, Lieutenant. However, to this point we have not seen it display anything more powerful than devices and instruments Starfleet already has. I would actually go so far as to say that in several cases present Starfleet equipment is superior to some of the device's manifested forms."

"Maybe so," Sulu looked thoughtful. "But I have a feeling, Mr. Spock, that that won't hold true. It doesn't make sense for it to hold true. All those different settings," and he pointed to the toggle gauge, "those different functions. Why so many varied ones and why conceal them behind the initial, inert, bubble shape?" He was studying the device and thinking hard.

"What do *you* think, Mr. Sulu? What could be behind such careful concealment of functions and their multiplicity?"

"I'm not sure, but I can imagine one possibility. Suppose this thing belonged to a spy or espionage agent of some sort? He could carry the bubble shape around openly. Maybe the bubble shape corresponds to some billion-year-old personal ornament or decoration, like a bracelet, for instance. And a spy would be just the one who could make good use of

something that looked harmless but could be made to serve as an energy absorber, a telescope, perhaps a communicator of some kind, a personal transport."

"I acknowledge your expertise in the field of weaponry, Mr. Sulu," said Spock readily, "but I do not see how you can determine a possible ownership classification."

"Just look at it, Mr. Spock." Sulu was convinced of his own supposition now. He took the device and held it up to the faint light. Lime-yellow gleamed on its metal surface, reflecting the life-support aura of both officers. "All these settings. I admit we don't know that a common Slaver soldier or even an ordinary citizen couldn't handle them all, but to what end? For a soldier, only the laser is an effective weapon. The other functions aren't necessary for an ordinary warrior's single objective: to kill the enemy. An ordinary Slaver citizen, if there were such a creature, wouldn't require that a multitude of functions be so cleverly disguised. But they *are* disguised.

"For that matter, it wouldn't be necessary for a warrior to have such an elaborately concealed set of functions. If the device produced a shield, well, that would be useful. Possibly the telescope, and certainly the energy absorber. But a communicator, a telescope, and the rocket transport? A soldier might have need of them all, but why put them all into a single device of tremendous technological complexity? No, the thing is too intricate—unless intended for someone who *has* to hide all those functions in a single place."

"Assuming it is a dangerous device intended for use by someone who doesn't wish it to look like that," Spock finally replied, with equal thoughtfulness, "the Slavers would have wanted to keep its secrets a secret. They would never have wanted a potential enemy to know that the device was anything other than a silvery bubble attached to a handle. If so, and if we follow your reasoning through to its logical conclusion, it seems reasonable to assume that the device possesses a self-destruct setting also."

Sulu indicated the toggle switch, which rested at the bottom of its slot. "But we've seen all the phases, all five manifestations of the device."

"Perhaps not." Spock took the device back, turned it over in his hand. "There is the null setting."

"Null setting, sir?"

"The first one, where the toggle was originally set. It is marked with a hieroglyph." One finger traced the strange writing while Sulu looked puzzled. "The device appears to be without function, at this setting. But then why should that setting be present in the first place?" Spock had the look of a mathematics professor on the trail of an errant ingredient in a catastrophe-theory problem. "Why not simply leave the device set at the telescope setting? There is no reason an ordinary person, Slaver or Vulcan or human, could not carry a small telescope about with him. Nor does the first setting correspond to a safety lock of any sort, since Chuft-Captain was able to move the toggle easily to the other five settings."

Sulu shrugged, took the device back, and indifferently nudged the toggle up to the top of its slot. Immediately the device dissolved in his hands, the fifth mode returning once more to the featureless silvery bubble shape.

It certainly looked harmless enough.

"Maybe," Sulu began thoughtfully, "it's the key to some kind of hidden setting, Mr. Spock. Maybe this manifestation is intentionally innocent. If we—" He stopped as a rumble like a distant earthquake sounded.

Beneath them the ground trembled. They turned in the direction of the sound.

Just over the rim of the highest ice block, a shallow cone shape with a flat base was rising steadily spaceward. Boulders and huge chunks of ice fell in a sparkling rain from its flanks. It was the *Traitor's Claw*, the Kzin ship, hatched from its place of concealment.

Narrow projections protruded from the edge of the cone. They looked suspiciously like weapons, weapons which a mere police vessel shouldn't be quipped with. Sulu and Spock hugged the protective overhang of the massive boulder next to them, trying to slip their revealing life-support auras wholly beneath the shielding mass.

Within the observation room of the ship, Chuft-Captain glanced back once to assure himself that the human female remained frozen on the police web. She glared back at him

with sufficient animation to tell him that she was alert and fully cognizant of what was taking place around her.

In one massive paw he held a communicator, standard Starfleet issue. He addressed himself to it while staring out the main port, which provided a moving view of the jumbled ice plain beneath the slowly moving ship. Neither of the two escaped prisoners, either the Vulcan or the human Sulu, were visible. That was hardly surprising. They were not fools and must have heard the *Traitor's Claw* lift. By now they should sensibly be well concealed in the crazy-quilt rocks below.

It would do them no good. Being familiar with human and Vulcan psychological orientation, Chuft-Captain knew that the possession of the human female was sufficient to bring the Slaver device once more into his hands.

"This is the *Traitor's Claw* calling Lieutenant Sulu," he said into the communicator. "Chuft-Captain speaks to you. We have the female prisoner. She is in good health, a condition dependent solely on your next actions. Will you bargain with us for the Slaver device or must we take harsh action to convince you?"

There followed a respectable pause during which no response was forthcoming. That did not bother Chuft-Captain. Any warrior would first consider every possible alternative before surrendering. He expected no less of the human.

"If you do not reply," he said into the communicator when a reasonable amount of time had passed without an answer from below, "it will not be pleasant for her."

Uhura might have given Chuft-Captain a reply, but it wouldn't have done her any good. She stood paralyzed on the police web, kept silent, and considered her predicament. It was probably fortunate for her, despite Chuft-Captain's patience, that Telepath was not present to inform him of her hostile thoughts.

The *Traitor's Claw* cruised back and forth over the icefields in a regular spiral pattern, searching the ragged formations below for traces of the escaped prisoners.

"Still no sign of them, Chuft-Captain," Flyer reported from his position at the controls.

Chuft-Captain snarled his acknowledgment, tried to repress a stab of pain and keep it out of his voice as he spoke into the communicator again. "I repeat, Lieutenant Sulu, we have the female human as hostage. You have something that *we* want. We will trade her life for the Slaver device."

Spock and Sulu remained well hidden beneath the overhanging lip of weathered rock. Together they had listened intently to Chuft-Captain's demands. Now Spock stared meaningfully across at his companion.

"Chuft-Captain's offer neglects certain important details, Lieutenant Sulu. Answer him."

Sulu palmed his own communicator, flipped it open, briefly considered his reply before speaking. "This is Sulu. You've taken care of Lieutenant Uhura. What about Mr. Spock and myself? If we're not included we can't consider your offer."

"You must surrender anyway," the Kzin commander's raspy voice said over the tiny speaker grid. "You cannot reach your shuttlecraft. There is no escape for you. But I will give a chance. I offer Mr. Spock single combat."

"Not interested," Sulu said immediately.

Spock only nodded. "Chuft-Captain must fight me. They could beam this entire region on low power, probably kill us without damaging the Slaver device. But he cannot risk letting me die without regaining his personal honor."

Back on board the *Traitor's Claw*, Chuft-Captain's claws contracted reflexively as he clutched tightly at the arm of his seat. Leaning to his left partially concealed the ends of the pale bandages and his uniform hid the the rest. His tail switched lightly above the deck, projecting backward through the slot provided by the Kzin chair.

"Why do you refuse? I am as the Vulcan left me," he informed the communicator, "with two ribs broken. I have not had them set. He may conceivably kill me."

Sulu hesitated, shut off the communicator while he watched his superior. Spock's attention was still on the sky, searching for the patrolling ship, but the helmsman knew that Spock had heard Chuft-Captain's words as clearly as he had. "What about what he says, Mr. Spock? Could you?"

"I kicked him over one heart, but Kzinti ribs have vertical bracing in addition to the horizontal bracing found in humans and Vulcans. His injury would still be severe, but far from crippling." He thought a moment, then added, "I compute the odds of my defeating Chuft-Captain in hand-to-hand combat at sixteen to one against, and that is assuming his injuries are as he claims."

Sulu flipped the communicator on again. "Sorry, offer refused," he said tersely. Putting the deactivated communicator away, he resumed his examination of the Slaver device, puzzling over Spock's suspicion of the innocent silver bubble shape.

Chuft-Captain stared out the fore port, at the endless fields of ice and ragged stone. Eventually, he turned his attention to the figure standing silent and frozen behind him. Uhura glared back at him.

"They think very little of you."

"Wrong." She wished she could scratch her right thigh. "They don't think much of *you*."

That provoked a vicious growl from the Kzin commander. Uhura wasn't impressed. Let them continue to consider her a dumb female like those of their own species. She would never give them an excuse to call her a coward. When Chuft-Captain turned his baleful gaze away from her and back to the fore port without saying anything else, she felt as if she had won a small but significant victory.

Sulu leaned back against their concave shelter, his life-support aura compressing to a thin lime-yellow line against his back. Again he examined the Slaver device in great detail. Again he found nothing faintly resembling another toggle switch, hidden button, or any other kind of control that could conceivably activate some unknown setting.

Turning the device once more, in the vague hope he might still somehow have overlooked something, Sulu became conscious of something he had not noticed before. He had had the hand grip in his right hand and the silver sphere in the other. When he'd turned the device this last time, he was

certain the sphere had moved slightly. He used his right hand again on the argent globe. Yes, it definitely moved!

Excited, he stood clear of the rock wall. Gripping the sphere firmly this time, he twisted sharply to one side. Nothing. He twisted in the opposite direction. This time the globe not only moved, it turned halfway around on its axis.

The familiar blurring distorted the device. This time, when it coalesced, the sphere was gone. In its place was a cone with its apex facing outward. The cone had a rounded base that blended smoothly into the hand grip. The configuration was so simple that Sulu almost shrugged it off as merely another disguise form and twisted the sphere back. But maybe the thing did something, despite its innocuous appearance.

One small, added shape gave credence to that thought. A tiny, round transparency was emplaced between the cone and the hand grip. A peculiarly arranged series of tiny lines were etched into it. They resembled an asterisk more than anything else.

Spock leaned forward as soon as the sphere shape had given way to the cone. Now he ran a finger over the strangely engraved little lens.

Chuft-Captain, he knew, would also have interpreted that tiny but significant transparency at first glance. "A self-destruct mechanism would not have a gun sight."

"No, it wouldn't," agreed Sulu readily. "Let's see what this setting does." Widening his stance, he raised the device as if it were an old-fashioned pistol. Aiming at a point on the distant horizon, he pulled the trigger.

An intensely blue beam sprang from the point of the cone, crossed into space. Slowly the helmsman lowered his arm until the blue line, which remained constant as long as he held the trigger down, touched the lowest ridge of rock and ice. There was a brilliant flare of pure white light. Sulu shut his eyes, blocking out the powerful radiance, then took his finger off the trigger. The glare vanished slowly, like a dying ember. In its place appeared a thick, rising cloud of dense gas and smoke mixed with vaporized ice and stone.

Sulu opened his eyes, stared in horror at the still growing pillar of boiling gases.

"We can't let them have *that!*"

"Fascinating," was all Spock said immediately. His attention was held by the tower of carbonized solids. "No laboratory in the Federation has ever produced a hand weapon of such power." He squinted into the distance. The cloud was finally beginning to dissipate, and he could see through it a little.

"The entire crest of the ice monolith you fired at appears to have vanished. Total conversion of matter to energy at this distance, and by a simple hand weapon."

"An army of Kzin warriors armed with these would be invincible," Sulu observed in awe, gazing at the simple cone shape he held. "One man could fight off a small ship. The whole galaxy would be their dinner table."

"And it was, Mr. Sulu, it was. I do not imagine they were called Slavers because of their benign dispositions."

"If we . . ." Sulu started to add, but something he saw caused him to pause. A rising wave of ice particles and small gravel was racing toward them like a dark cloud from the region of the destruction, carried on a disturbed wind front by the shock of the vaporization.

"Hit the dirt!" he yelled.

Both men curled up beneath their overhanging boulder, tried to press themselves into the solid stone. But like the power of the Slaver weapon, the shock wave when it arrived was far stronger than either had imagined. Both men were lifted from their places and slung through the atmosphere. Sulu did something to the Slaver device just before he hit the ground hard. Spock landed nearby, no more gently. A faint reverse shock whistled over them a moment later, stirring both immobile bodies like sawdust on a plate. They did not move.

A few minutes later a slim, flattened shape *thrummed* overhead. In its observation chamber, one seated Kzin let out a snarl of triumph at something just glimpsed below.

"There they are, Chuft-Captain!"

The injured commander leaned forward, recognized the two motionless bipedal shapes. "Peculiar. There must have been a ground-level aftershock. They were too exposed to cope with

it." He grinned. "How fortunate for us. Set down as close to them as you can manage, Pilot."

"Yes, honored one." The pilot operated controls and the *Traitor's Claw* began a slow, smooth descent. The "stolen" police vessel touched down only a few meters from where the bodies of Spock and Sulu rested unmoving on the icy surface.

Chuft-Captain glanced over at Flyer. "Bring them in. Carefully."

"Yes, Chuft-Captain." Flyer saluted, turned, and headed for the airlock.

While he was gone the rest of the Kzinti waited anxiously in the observation chamber. Uhura regarded the aliens with interest. She had hopes that Sulu and Spock were feigning unconsciousness, perhaps in a bold attempt to get themselves taken on board the Kzinti ship, where with the aid of the Slaver weapon they might have a chance to overpower her captors. So she received a rude shock when the party of suited Kzinti returned, carrying two limp forms that showed no hint of consciousness.

"They are alive, Chuft-Captain," Flyer reported to his commander as the other Kzinti stood the two former prisoners back on the police web, which had been turned off to allow them to be placed, but which was then quickly switched back on to keep them upright.

"They have sustained some bruising, mostly internal, from what our physician told me," Flyer said. "Their life-support belts cushioned them enough to keep them alive. Without those belts, I am sure they would have been scattered in pieces across the ice."

"Some bruising, yes." Chuft-Captain's right hand rubbed at his cracked ribs, touched gingerly at the bandages wrapped around his chest. Flyer handed him an object and the commander gazed down at it speculatively. "Meanwhile we have the problem of this."

His uncertainty was understandable. Before being knocked unconscious, Sulu had managed to twist the cone shape. It had once more reverted to the maddeningly familiar silver sphere.

Both officers regained their senses together. Sulu saw that the Kzinti had no interest in them for the moment. The whole crew were offering suggestions dealing with the Slaver weapon. Much yelling and growling was evident. Everyone held a different opinion, it seemed. But eventually, simply by fiddling incessantly with the device, one of them discovered the sphere twist. Or rather, *a* sphere twist. Somehow it seemed to Sulu that the globe had been turned in a manner different from the way he had done it.

Expectedly, the silver ball vanished. But the cone shape did not appear. Instead, the sphere was replaced by a smaller, rose-hued globe. A small grid was set into the top of the ball.

None of the formerly talkative Kzinti volunteered an opinion as to the possible function of this new manifestation. The device had proven too many wrong already, and none of them wished to be embarrassed in front of Chuft-Captain with an inaccurate appraisal of the device's capability.

So it was Chuft-Captain who finally had to ask for theories. "What would this be?" He pointed a thick finger at the small, reddish ball.

"I have no idea," Flyer said quickly. He glanced thoughtfully at a gauge set into the side of his armored suit. "Whatever it does, it generates power."

That revelation produced more confused yowling and growls from the assembled Kzinti.

Nor were they the only ones speculating on the device's newest, and most surprising, manifestation. "There's a grid set into it," Spock said to Uhura and Sulu. "It may be another communications setting. Possibly related in some way to the first communicator shape keyed by the first notch in the toggle slot, but," and he almost frowned slightly, "that would seem redundant, and out of keeping with the Slaver's oft-demonstrated efficiency. Not to mention the economical, many-functions-in-one nature of the device itself. If we—"

A new—startlingly new—voice spoke in the observation chamber. It spoke in Kzinti, or at least something very close to Kzinti. It had the distortions common to an out-of-town rural visiting a large, cosmopolitan metropolis and trying to converse in the local dialect. That meant it was

comprehensible, but spiced with a notable yet not quite definable difference.

It was immediately clear that the voice did not emanate from the mouth of any of the assembled warriors; this was confirmed by the manner in which they abruptly ceased all conversation among themselves. The voice sounded again. It had a faint crackle in it, like carbonation in liquid. All at once it became evident to everyone that the voice came from the little grid on top of the Slaver device's newest configuration.

"Whatever it is, it sure has the Kzinti frightened," Sulu observed with satisfaction.

"That's not surprising." Spock's placid expression showed that it wasn't. "The Kzinti, if I recall correctly, have many legends of weapons haunted by their original owners."

Uhura stared, fascinated, at the device. "Could it be a voice-response control, requiring verbal direction?"

The Kzinti had clustered closely around Chuft-Captain and the device, and the muffled sounds of conversation were all the frustrated officers could make out.

"I think not," said Spock. "Somehow it actually appears to be conversing with them." He paused, listening. "Yes. It gives replies to direct questions, and reasons abstractly where appropriate. A reasoning computer so small, capable of independent analysis and reply? Even with the subminiaturization that modern Federation technology has achieved, that is hard to believe. A computer, yes, of any tiny size you want. But one capable of reasoning and decision-making? An incredible accomplishment."

"Are you sure, Mr. Spock?" Sulu asked.

Spock listened for a while longer, then nodded affirmatively. "It is much more than a computer. Its logic circuitry must be infinitely more sophisticated than anything we have yet developed, save for huge reasoning computers such as the main one on board the *Enterprise*. This one appears capable of similar activity, and it is unbelievably smaller."

The crowd of Kzinti, their initial excitement beginning to fade, spread out from one another. So when the voice spoke again, it became loud enough and clear enough for the

translators hanging from each of the prisoners' waists to interpret.

"How long," Chuft-Captain was asking the tiny rose sphere, "since you were last turned off?"

"I do not know," the stilted voice of the Slaver device promptly replied. "When I am off I have no sense of passing time."

"Very well." The Kzinti commander opted for another tack. "What is the last thing you remember?"

"We were on a mission." Spock couldn't tell from the awkward inflection in the machine's voice whether it was referring to several Slavers, or the device and a single owner, when it said "We." "I may not tell you of the mission unless you know certain coded terminology."

Flyer spoke up. "If you could describe to us the positions of the stars above the last ship or world you were on, we would be able to guess how much time has passed since then."

"Without certain code words," the computer voice informed them evenly, "I may not describe the location."

Patience was not one of the Kzinti's finer qualities. Chuft-Captain couldn't keep the irritation out of his voice when he next addressed the device. "One of the settings on you was a matter-conversion beam of tremendous power. We know that, having observed it in operation." He glanced back, smiling victoriously at the frozen prisoners. "We all saw what it can do." He turned back to the device. "Tell us how to find that setting on you."

There was a pause, then, "Move the toggle until you reach the original null position."

This affirmative response, without a single reference to code words, produced an excited, anticipatory chattering among the assembled Kzinti, so much so that their yowling drowned out everything else the computer was saying.

"That's the end, then," said the despondent Sulu. "They've succeeded in communicating with the device."

"There must be *something* we can do." Uhura fought against the invisible bonds restraining her, found the police-web field strong as ever. Then she noticed Spock. The first officer was never demonstrative, no matter how serious the

situation; but considering the gravity of their present predicament, he appeared even more phlegmatic than usual.

"Mr. Spock, you know what's happened," she called to him. "Don't you have any suggestions?"

Spock apparendy did not. He was staring blankly at the excited cluster of milling Kzinti. "Most peculiar," he murmured, and that seemed to constitute his final words on the matter.

Uhura stared back at the Kzinti, but saw nothing to inspire such a comment from her superior.

Chuft-Captain raised the Slaver weapon, brandished it aloft triumphantly. If Uhura had no inkling of why Spock was so fascinated, Sulu did, the moment he set eyes on the weapon again.

It had changed, obviously in response to Chuft-Captain's request. But it had not changed into the matter-conversion configuration. At least, not into the weapons mode Spock and Sulu had used prior to their recent recapture. Not one cone but a pair projected from the hand grip now. Neither apex faced outward. Instead, the two points faced each other. They came close to touching, forming a distorted dumbbell shape.

Still chattering enthusiastically among themselves, the knot of Kzinti trooped from the chamber, moving toward the ship's airlock.

"That was not," Spock said decisively, "the total conversion beam. We must assume the weapon gave them directions for employing still another new setting."

"But if it wasn't the conversion beam . . .?" Sulu hesitated, glanced anxiously around at the exit taken by the departing Kzinti.

Uhura, meanwhile, was shifting her attention from one officer to the other, their statements only serving to confuse her further instead of providing enlightenment.

Followed by Flyer and the rest of the Kzinti, Chuft-Captain marched outside. The Kzinti commander still walked in pain, leaning to his left and occasionally clutching at his cracked ribs. The party of armor-suited aliens moved a respectable distance from the *Traitor's Claw*. Having already observed the

power of the Slaver weapon, Chuft-Captain wanted to be well clear of his ship before activating it again.

Once they had ascended a jumble of shattered ice blocks, he inspected the re-formed weapon. The double-cone arrangement looked little more like a weapon than many of the device's previous manifestations.

"Like the other configurations," he informed his subordinates, who stood below and slightly behind him, "this new one appears to be devoid of a gun sight."

"It may be a broad-beam weapon," Flyer suggested, "for use on distant or rapidly moving or multiple targets. We saw its power. There may be only a need to aim it very generally in a target's direction. It is definitely a weapon. I suggest you fire at a very distant subject."

Chuft-Captain concurred. "Very well." He assumed as formal a marksman's stance as he could manage with his damaged ribs.

"We can't let them have that weapon." Uhura fought the police web frantically. Though she exerted all the energy in her body, shoving in every direction including straight up, she was unable to move a centimeter and remained frozen in place.

Spock's reassuring comment was delivered with an eerie calm. "They're not about to get it, Lieutenant. I think you are worrying needlessly." She stared at him uncomprehendingly. Sulu did likewise, but the helmsman had a glimmering of what the first offieer meant.

"Why aren't they?" she asked.

"Assume you are a Slaver war computer, Lieutenant Uhura. A small one, to be sure, but a war computer nonetheless. You have been deactivated, you do not know for how long, but when you were deactivated there was a war in progress. Assume furthermore that it is likely, as Mr. Sulu has suggested, that you are a secret weapon in the truest sense of the term, on a secret mission of some sort." He paused a moment, continued when Uhura had had time to digest this.

"Now you are abruptly awakened by aliens you have never seen before and retain no memory of. They do not know any

of the military passwords. They are certainly not recognizable as belonging to the hierarchy of possible Slaver allies. They ask you so many questions it's obvious they know little about you and are trying to find out a great deal more, particularly anything involving weapons settings. Your true owner is nowhere about." He turned to eye her expectantly.

"What would *you* think?"

Uhura didn't have to consider long before replying. "I'd think that I'd been captured by the enemy. Or at least by a non-ally."

"And when they asked you," Sulu prompted eagerly, "how to find your most powerfully destructive setting, what would you give them?"

Uhura and the helmsman exchanged meaningful glances while Spock merely stood staring thoughtfully out the main port, wishing the Kzinti were in view and yet very glad they weren't.

Chuft-Captain aimed the double-cone arrangement as best he could. Focusing on a distant hilltop, he pulled the trigger on the Slaver weapon.

Chuft-Captain vanished. So did Flyer and the rest of the Kzinti standing with him. So did several tons of ice and stone beneath them, and so did part of the hull of the *Traitor's Claw*.

In fact, everything within a radius of twenty meters of the former Chuft-Captain simply disappeared—including, naturally, the Slaver weapon. As Spock had surmised, the war computer built into the device had reasoned that the Kzinti were not entitled to operate it. Instead of the weapons setting discovered by Spock and Sulu, it had provided Chuft-Captain with its self-destruct setting.

Portions of three rooms on board the Kzinti vessel had been opened to space. The control room, a storage chamber, and the crew common room now looked out onto a near vacuum. Walls, equipment, and the ground they had rested on had completely vanished. The conversion had extended to within half a meter of Spock's left leg.

There were no aftereffects. The self-destruct setting operated much in the manner of normal atmospheric lightning: a million-volt bolt could strike a tree and a man a few meters away might not be harmed. Similarly, though the imprisoned officers had been standing frozen on the very edge of the disruption field, they had not been touched. Within the disruption field, however, everything for a radius of twenty meters from Chuft-Captain had been converted. A violent *whoosh* of air escaping from the *Traitor's Claw* was the only sound produced by the disappearance.

Spock barely had time enough to say clearly, "Activate life-support belts!" Having cut into the control room, the self-destruct field had sliced through the police web and its power supply. The three prisoners found they were able to move. Hands touched controls at their waists. Three lime-yellow auras sprang instantly into existence in the dim light of the powerless observation room.

Uhura was studying the smooth-sided, round-bottomed crater in front of them with interest. "Total-disruptor field." She wasn't worried about an attack from any remaining Kzinti. If any remained aboard, they would be too busy trying to lock themselves into airtight compartments and find alternate sources of atmosphere to bother offering hinderance to escaping prisoners.

"Yes," commented Spock. "Another conventional weapon. It would seem that the total-conversion beam Lieutenant Sulu and I discovered was the only thing the Slavers had that we do not also possess, in one form or another."

Sulu walked to the edge of the sliced-open room. It had been cut, he noted, as neatly as with any industrial phaser. The sides and bottom of the crater were smooth as glass, marred only by a few unbalanced boulders and chunks of ice that had fallen into the pit and gathered at the bottom.

"No sign of the weapon, of course." He stood straight, sighed in disappointment. "It would have looked nice in some museum."

"It would never have remained in a museum long, Lieutenant," Spock observed quietly. "There was too much power in that single unique setting. If not the Kzinti, then the Klingons or some other warlike species would have tried to

possess it, to copy it, and to duplicate its destructive potential." His gaze lifted and he stared across the open pit. On the far side of the pit and intervening icefield the shuttlecraft *Copernicus* waited. Only the gaping glassy depression in the ground indicated that anything out of the ordinary had occurred on the barren planet of Beta Lyrae. The depression . . . and a small police vessel sliced as neatly as an apple by the knife of some titan.

"Strange," the first officer of the *Enterprise* mused aloud, "how the past sometimes breaks through into the present. A war a billion years old could have sparked a new conflict between the Federation and the Kzinti." He turned to face his companions.

"I think it's time for us to leave. The weapon is now history, along with the Slaver Empire. We have a conference to attend. But while we don't have the weapon, Lieutenant Sulu, at least we have something that might grace your imagined museum."

He gestured nearby. The stasis box that had contained the Slaver weapon rested near one half of a tilted table in the room. The other half of the table and the Kzinti's own empty stasis box had lain within the self-destruct disruptor field and had vanished.

"The box isn't much," Spock observed, "but even though empty it will excite those who see it. They can fill it with their imaginations."

Uhura nodded, leaned over the table's remains and tucked the box which had caused them so much time and trouble loosely under one arm. Devoid of its contents, it was only an ordinary metal container. An ordinary metal container over a billion years old.

Moving carefully downward, they made their way out of the hulk of the *Traitor's Claw*. They skirted the slick rim of the pit, a technological rabbit hole down which had vanished the belligerent dreams of Kzin. Once more on solid ground, they made their way steadily toward the *Copernicus* and a distant rendezvous with their ship, their friends, and a new race to whom the Slaver Empire was more tall tale than truth . . .

XI

The commander of Starbase 25 greeted them personally when the *Enterprise* had finished docking procedure. "Jarrod Shulda, Captain Kirk," the deceptively ordinary-looking man introduced himself. The two shook hands, turned and stared down the extended docking tube leading into the body of the station.

"We know what your mission is, Captain," Shulda said volubly, "and we've been preparing for your arrival." He checked a wrist chronometer and smiled. "Glad you made it on time."

"Was there any reason to assume we wouldn't?" Kirk wondered aloud as they turned down a corridor.

Scott and M'ress accompanied him. The Caitian communications officer appeared unaffected by her recent unfortunate experience. Soon after the pheraligen had taken effect, she and M'viore and R'leez had resumed their normal duties and shifts. Their mental readjustment was helped by Dr. McCoy's instructions to all personnel to extend sympathy and understanding to their three temporarily deranged shipmates, while mentioning any actual incidents or encounters as little as possible. The order was complied with, even by the security personnel whom the three berserk Caitians had put in Sick Bay.

"No offense, Captain. I wasn't impugning your vessel's efficiency. I'm glad you arrived on time because it will take some of the pressure off us, here at the base." Shulda tried to add some humor to a vitally important, serious situation. "Starfleet Command's mighty nervous about this whole Briamos business. They've been talking our ears off here, asking for confirmation of your arrival. I'm happy I can finally send that. Frankly, Captain, you could have arrived here the day after you received your orders and I suspect we still would have had half a dozen worried inquiries from anxious bureaucrats concerned over your slow pace."

"Well, we're here now," Kirk said easily. They were entering a small conference room and the captain added softly, "Most of us, anyhow."

Now who was worrying needlessly? He was no better than those back at Command, continually thinking about the unknown progress of the three officers on board the shuttlecraft *Copernicus*. Resolutely, he shut all thoughts of Spock, Sulu, and Uhura from his mind.

It was an effort.

A florid, plump little woman with oriental features and the air of a society matron was standing next to a small podium going over a handful of notes when they entered. She turned, saw them, and scurried crablike across the floor to greet them. All her movements were quick, her gestures expansive as a courting blue jay, voice brisk and prying.

"Captain Kirk." She extended a smooth palm, thimble-thick fingers extended. "I'm Chu Leiski, sociologist by trade, diplomatic adviser by necessity."

"So you're the resident expert on our friends-to-be, the Briamosites?" Scott was eyeing the woman uncertainly.

"Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Scott," supplied Kirk, "my acting second-in-command, and Lieuteant M'ress, acting communications chief."

"My, my, Captain, but to a stranger you'd seem to be running a thespianic enterprise. But as they say, all the universe is a stage. Please take some seats, any you like, and we'll get started. I'm please to meet you all. We've a great deal to brief you on."

A little breathless with trying to keep up, Kirk slid slowly into one of the chairs in the conference room. Sociologist Leiski moved to stand behind the podium. She put down her notes and activated the electronic readout set into the podium top.

"None of the information I'm going to impart to you is critical by and of itself, but I've included everything we know on the Briamosites. No telling, no telling when during the conference some obscure chunk of information will become crucial. The Briamosites are a very thorough people, and they admire that thoroughness in others. So that's how these

briefings will run—thorough in execution and thorough in content. You have to explore a whole pool in order to find the school of minnows, sometimes."

Shutting out the homilies, Kirk asked, "Just how big is that pool? How much have we been able to learn about the Briamosites, Chu Leiski?"

"Not a great deal, Captain. Certainly not as much as we'd like to before you have to go off to this conference. That's why," and she smiled at Scott, "despite your chief engineer's compliment, I can't pass myself off as the resident expert on the Briamosites. There *are* no experts on Briamos and its people."

She leaned both elbows on the podium. "In fact, we're hoping that you and those of your crew who attend or participate in the conference will learn all they can, so they can come back here and lecture me—and all the other so-called experts." Quite suddenly, she dropped her chatty, informal manner and exchanged it for that of the dignified instructor.

Moving to a large screen, she touched a control. The screen lit up, but no pictures or words appeared on it yet. "My connection with the Briamosites comes from the fact that I was an assistant to Ambassador Laiguer. I was half observer, half adviser to him on personal Briamosite interactions. That was my specialty."

"Since you served as the ambassador's assistant and have spent more time among them than any of us, why aren't you coming with us to the conference?" Scott wanted to know.

She smiled again, briefly. "I'm not an official diplomat, nor a member of Starfleet. Just a civilian technician. I have no diplomatic credentials to present to Briamos. As I said, the Briamosites are a very thorough folk. They're as thorough about protocol as anything else. My presence in the official negotiating party would be considered insulting."

"You don't have to be part of the actual negotiating group." Scott could be persistent. "Why dinna ye just come along to give us on-the-spot information?"

"I have to stay here, much as I'd like to go," Leiski told him. "I've been assigned to relay all information on the progress of

the conference from here, as it arrives from Briamos and the *Enterprise* back here to Starbase Twenty-Five. I'm to provide my own comments and analysis to accompany your reports, and in turn I'm to convey back to you any suggestions or orders they might come up with." She ruffled her notes.

"I told them I could comment, albeit a little slower, from Briamos via deep-space beam, but it apparently was considered vital in certain circles to have a knowledgeable intermediary between Starfleet Command and Briamos while the conference was taking place. That's me. Besides," she added convincingly, "in a few days you'll all know as much about the Briamosites as I do."

The lectures proceeded smoothly. Despite her pose of self-deprecation when it came to her professional accomplishments, Chu Leiski proved an adept and efficient teacher. Occasionally Kirk brought other personnel along, from Sciences, or Communications, or other departments, as Leiski's subject matter shifted to bear particularly on one section's specialty. But as the days passed with no communication from the *Copernicus*, Kirk found his attention wandering when it should have been fixed on this or that aspect of Briamosite culture.

Finally, after the last lecture, questions were put to Chu Leiski by Kirk and other officers. She replied with answers and questions of her own.

As the room was emptying, Leiski drew Kirk aside. "I know you'll do the Federation proud, Captain. I wish I were going with you."

"Obviously Starfleet thinks you're more important to them here," Kirk told her. "I know you'd like to be part of the conference, and you will be, an integral part. You just won't be there in body."

"Oh, it's not that, Captain." Leiski was cleaning the nails of her left hand with a nail on the right and she didn't look up at him. "I hope the conference is a success, naturally, but I don't especially care if I'm a part of it. I just like Briamos and its people, that's all, and I want to make sure I have the chance to go back." She looked up now, smiled fitfully. "Do well, Captain Kirk, so I can go back?" She turned and left.

Alone in the room, Kirk felt confident for the first time. No matter how temperamental and difficult professional diplomats such as Ambassador Laiguer found the Briamosites, they had to be a people worth knowing if they could inspire such affection and interest in a woman like Chu Leiski . . .

Kirk was resting in the command chair, brooding silently. He and McCoy had been discussing items of no particular importance—a rare luxury for them both—when Kirk suddenly said, "You realize, Bones, that if they're not here by fourteen hundred tomorrow we'll have to leave without them. We can't delay departure."

"I know, Jim. I'm sure Spock, Sulu, and Uhura know it too, wherever they are."

Kirk turned, stared at the blank viewscreen. His hand tightened slightly on the arm of the command chair, but only McCoy noticed.

They should have reported in by now!

M'ress was already at her post when Kirk entered the bridge the following morning. He glanced over at her, framed a wordless question. She shook her head slowly. The message he had hoped for had not arrived.

Almost, he asked for something she could not give. Then his lips tightened and he took his seat half angrily. "Mr. Arex, Mr. Vedama, prepare for Briamos departure."

"But, Captain," Vedama began, "can't we—?"

"The one thing we can't do, Lieutenant, is be late for that conference. We depart at fourteen hundred. I won't risk traveling at maximum velocity and the chance of an engine malfunction delaying our scheduled arrival, in order to wait any longer. You know the Briamosites' fanatic attitude toward punctuality. You attended many of the lectures yourself."

"Yes, sir. I did." Discouraged, Vedama turned away.

Arex commenced programming their course, frowned his odd Edoan frown, and called back over a shoulder, "Captain Kirk?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Captain, our detectors show an unidentified shuttlecraft coming in."

"Check with starbase communications, M'ress," Kirk ordered quickly, hardly daring to believe.

"Yes, sirr." A pause, then she said excitedly, "They arre not expecting any shuttles, sirr. And none of theirr own arre out."

"We're too far from any well-populated worlds for easy shuttle transportation," Kirk mused.

"Call coming in, sirr," the Caitian communications officer announced. She added without waiting for an order, "Acknowledging incoming signal."

This one time, Kirk did not reprimand her.

"Shuttlecraft *Copernicus* to *Enterprise*." Spock's lean, relaxed tones gave no hint of anything amiss on board the overdue shuttle. "Request docking."

"M'ress, put me through." He waited while she nudged the necessary controls and then he spoke into the chair pickup. "Spock, this is Kirk here."

"Hello, Captain."

Kirk waited, until it was evident his first officer didn't intend to expand on his greeting, " 'Hello, Captain'? Is that all you have to say, Mr. Spock? You're three days overdue." He tried to sound accusing, but came out appearing worried. "What happened to you in Gruyakin?"

"We had to cope with the fact that the stasis box had been stolen prior to our arrival, Captain."

"Stolen?" Kirk twitched violently.

"Yes, Captain," came Spock's confirmation, calm as ever. "We recovered it only after the stasis box had placed the would-be thief in a stasis field of his own."

"Stasis field of his own?"

"That's correct, Captain. However, that was a minor problem, compared to the trouble the Kzinti caused us."

"Kzinti? Kzinti!"

"It is not like you to respond to every statement with a questioning echo, Captain." The first officer sounded mildly reproving without being outright insubordinate.

"It's not like anyone, Mr. Spock, to go after a stasis box, and then have it stolen, and then run into—" He stopped, took a deep breath. "Mr. Spock, I will expect to see you in my cabin as soon as you've docked and gotten yourselves squared away—and bring that stasis box." A sudden thought moved him to ask quickly, "Lieutenants Sulu and Uhura are all right?"

"Yes, sir," "Yes, Captain," came the almost simultaneous replies from both officers.

"Good. You can both report to me along with Mr. Spock. Maybe the three of you together can come up with one sensible explanation for your delay."

"I'm sure you'll find both the stasis box and our explanation equally intriguing, Captain," Spock assured him.

As usual, Spock understated Kirk's reaction. All four sat in his cabin. Spock was concluding their story. He had related it all, without pausing. Kirk simply sat at his desk, shaking his head in response to one part of the tale, nodding at another, staring in disbelief at still a third. The first officer did most of the talking, while Sulu and Uhura occasionally broke in to provide emotional coloration of their own. The stasis box rested on a table between them.

"And that is how the box has come to be here empty, Captain," Spock finished.

Kirk stared at the metal cube for a long moment. "My congratulations to all of you. Merely being here is proof of how well you carried out your assignment."

"I beg to differ with you, Captain," said Spock. "We lost the contents of the box, the Slaver weapon."

"That was unavoidable, Mr. Spock. While we don't have it, more importantly neither do the Kzinti. Furthermore, the Federation still has the three of you." He studied the box. Its silvery surface shone metallically in the cabin light. "There ought to be *something* we can—" He broke off, and a slightly mischievous, slightly satanic grin appeared on his face.

"We'll take it to the conference," he announced. "Mr. Spock, you and Chief Engineer Scott can rig a small device to place inside for generating an imitation Slaver field. The box itself,"

he went on, leaning forward, "is every bit as impressive as any discovered. With an aura surrounding it, no one would know it's been opened. No need to tell the Briamosites, or the Klingons, and I don't think any of them will rush to open it manually, in front of all the others."

"That would be deceitful, Captain," Spock observed disapprovingly.

"Diplomatic, Mr. Spock, simply diplomatic. Remember, the Briamosites will choose between the Klingons and the Federation. I am not going to stick to Marquis of Queensberry rules when something as vital as an interstellar alliance with a race as important as the Briamosites is at stake. And especially not when the matter also involves Klingons."

"Pardon, Captain . . . Marquis of Queensberry rules?" Spock asked.

"They have to do with boxing, Mr. Spock," Sulu informed him.

"Oh yes, boxing. One of the ancient barbarous human martial arts." Sulu bridled and Spock hastened to add, "No offense, Mr. Sulu. I was referring only to the primitive, unrefined techniques of human warfare, not to fencing or the more sophisticated forms of self-defense."

Sulu looked uncertain, but relaxed.

" 'Barbarous' is the right word when negotiating with Klingons, Spock." Kirk had turned grim. "You know the Klingon watch phrase when it comes to diplomacy: 'That which is expedient rather than that which is truthful.' So we'll bend the truth a little bit ourselves. We may not actually have to lie. If no one asks us whether the stasis box has been opened, I see no reason to volunteer the information that it has."

"You are rationalizing, Captain." Spock refused to be argued out of his stance. "But considering the importance of the conference, I find, reluctantly, that I must concur with your methodology. We must show ourselves as adaptable as the Klingons."

The *Enterprise* was well on its way to Briamos from Starbase 25 and approaching the limits of Federation territory, when an unexpected buffeting struck the ship. One moment

they were cruising along easily—the next, the ship was shuddering as if afflicted with metallic pneumonia. As suddenly as the disturbance began, it stopped.

"Now what could have caused that?" Kirk wondered, then added more loudly, "Lieutenant Uhura, damage report."

"All stations all decks report no damage and secure, Captain," she reported in a few minutes. "Several sections want to know what happened."

"So do I. Mr. Spock?"

The first officer was bent over his readouts, then looked up. "I am not certain, Captain. It could have been caused by any of several phenomena, external or internal." He touched a control. "Engineering, Mr. Spock here."

"Aye, Mr. Spock," replied Chief Engineer Scott. "What the devil was that?"

"You do not know, Commander?" Spock asked.

"No sir. I was hopin' you'd be able to tell me."

"I am attempting to find out by eliminating possibilities, Commander. Bridge out." Spock made several more fast checks, looked back at Kirk.

"It would appear to be an external problem, Captain." Spock appeared to hesitate. "As far as outside causes—"

Further buffeting, not a repeat of the last but stronger this time, rocked the *Enterprise* again. It had enough force to jolt small objects loose from their places at desk and console. It also lasted slightly longer than the previous shaking, and stopped just as mysteriously.

Uhura relayed the gratifying no-damage reports from each deck and section while Spock worked feverishly now at the science computer.

"I think I have it, Captain." He glanced up finally from his instrumentation. "If the information compiled by our long-range sensors is accurate, we would do well to immediately—"

He never finished the suggestion. A giant hand slapped the *Enterprise* sideways, flung Kirk from the command chair. He barely caught himself in midair to keep from being thrown against the navigation-helm console.

All across the bridge, other crew members were slung from their positions. Only Spock, who was half prepared for the shock because of what the sensors had told him, clung tightly to his seat and absorbed the buffeting. But this time the shaking didn't stop. It fluctuated from dangerous to irritating, but never ceased entirely.

Kirk crawled carefully back into the command chair. "Mr. Sulu, all ahead warp factor eight! Emergency power!"

"I'm trying, Captain," Sulu shouted after a frustrating struggle with the controls. "She's not responding properly. We're caught in something."

"Energy storm," Spock announced loudly, over the noise of the shaking. "Captain, sensors report a variable pulsar in the immediate spatial vicinity. That's what's causing the uneven buffeting. It's rotating at a high rate of speed, throwing out intermittent, unpredictable bursts of tremendous energy. I should have recognized the cause sooner but—" He broke off, concentrated on keeping his seat as a violent *spang* sounded through the fabric of the ship's hull.

Kirk thought of a hammer pounding on a metal pail—and they were inside the pail.

"Captain!"

Kirk instantly recognized the urgent voice shouting over the chair intercom.

"Hang on back there, Scotty."

"What's going on, sir? The strain on the engines tryin' to hold us to a course through this is makin' my stress gauges look drunk. And the hull's showin' strain, too."

"Variable pulsar, Scotty."

"What? But how did we get so close? Shouldn't . . .?"

"I know, Scotty. Let's wonder about that later. Bridge out." He rolled to his right, remembered the sensation so well described in books of sea captains of old. "Mr. Sulu, change course. We can't fight through this. Compute to—" He held on, gritting his teeth, forearm straining as another violent jolt battered the ship. "Compute position of pulsar, utilizing sensor readings, Mr. Sulu. Engage course directly opposite to plotted wavicle flow!"

"Aye, Captain!" A brief pause was long enough for the *Enterprise*'s superfast navigation computer, operated by Lieutenant Arex's skilled three hands. Then Sulu fed it to the helm. Abruptly the *Enterprise* came about, although there was no sensation of turning on the bridge: The curve the ship was making was far too gradual for it to affect the artificial gravity field.

The buffeting gentled, the galactic storm falling to a electromagnetic zephyr, but didn't cease completely.

"How are our shields holding, Mr. Spock?"

The first officer checked his instruments. "Still holding, Captain. I would be surprised if we have not suffered some external damage, though. We were caught utterly unprepared, and our shields are not designed to absorb that kind of intense radiation bombardment anywhere but at different spots at a time, as in a phaser attack. The storm enveloped us completely."

He checked his readouts again. "We absorbed saturation-level bombardment for nearly two minutes." Someone on the bridge whistled in awe. "We are fortunate to still have power."

"I know we've been lucky, Mr. Spock. But if we'd struck that storm at a sharper angle, plunged deeper into it before we realized what was happening, we'd have less than power." Everyone knew what Kirk was implying. A variable pulsar, at close range, could put out more than enough energy to fry the best-shielded vessel in space. The *Enterprise* had barely escaped being turned into a vast, metal coffin.

It was a nervous moment as another tsunami of energetic particles rocked the ship. This was the last one of any kind, powerful or gentle. Seconds later the warp drive had outpaced the wave front assaulting them.

"All right, Mr. Sulu." Kirk discovered half the muscles in his body were still contracted, forced them to relax. "Compute a new course and bring us back toward Briamos . . . and keep a slight curve out on the new heading." That ought to keep them clear of the receding pulsar's most powerful outbursts.

"Damage reports coming in, sir." Uhura listened a moment, then added more quietly, "They're not negative this time."

"I don't doubt it." Kirk readied himself. "Anything of real significance?"

"Several sections on Decks Seven and Eight report external structural damage in their area, sir. Estimate is that a portion of hull plating will have to be replaced."

"Contact Engineering and inform Chief Scott—though he may know about it already. Tell him to put a couple of crews to work on the damage. They'll have to rig something temporary as best they can. We can't afford the time to go back to Starbase Twenty-Five for formal repairs."

"Our appearance when we arrive in orbit around Briamos will not be the best, Captain," Spock pointed out.

"I know, Spock, but I'd rather show up looking a little bruised than not show up on time. According to what I heard during our briefings, if we're late we might as well not show up at all."

"I have already examined a part of the briefing material in detail, Captain, and I concur." The science officer turned his attention to the fore viewscreen, which showed only steadily burning normal stars forward. "A near thing. We should take time to report the hazard."

"That's right." Kirk turned, glanced over his shoulder. "Lieutenant Uhura, give me Starbase Twenty-Five contact."

Uhura worked busily at her console. Kirk waited . . . and waited. "Lieutenant, what's the delay?"

"I'm sorry, sir. Apparently some of our external communications facilities were damaged by the energy storm. I've finally gotten through to the base, but I can only receive audio at the moment."

"That'll do, Lieutenant. Inform Engineering and have Scotty get on that damage also."

"Starbase Twenty-Five," came a pleasant, mildly concerned voice over the bridge speakers. "Lieutenant Jorgenson speaking. Go ahead, *Enterprise*."

"Mr. Spock, you have the coordinates?" The first officer nodded. "Tell them, then."

Spock switched on his own pickup. "Lieutenant Jorgenson, are you recording this transmission?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. We have just ridden out a violent energy storm, radiation put out in ship-crippling bursts by a variable pulsar of," and he read off several figures, giving galactic position and the pulsar's estimated frequency of critical-intensity outbursts.

There was an unexpected silence at the other end. Kirk and Spock exchanged puzzled glances. "Do you copy, Starbase Twenty-Five?" Uhura finally asked.

"We copy," came the lieutenant's voice, "but . . . would you mind giving those figures again please, sir? Especially making certain of the coordinates?"

"The coordinates were correct the first time," replied Spock evenly, "however," and he repeated the entire sequence of identifying numbers.

"But that's impossible," Jorgenson insisted. "Those figures can't be right!"

"I assure you that it is not impossible and that our figures are correct." Spock sounded just the faintest bit peeved. "Are you denying that we just experienced the situation described?"

"No, no . . . it's not that, sir. I've counterplotted your figures against the base charts and we have that pulsar clearly marked. There are four beacons of deep-space broadcast capability set well clear and equally spaced around that pulsar to warn approaching ships of the danger well in advance."

Kirk's thoughts tumbled over one another. "This is Captain Kirk speaking, Lieutenant. We certainly weren't warned. We picked up no beacon transmissions." He glanced sharply to his left. "Lieutenant Uhura?"

"No, sir!" She looked shocked. "You can't miss an emergency deep-space beacon. Not even if I wanted to. I didn't pick up as much as a cautionary beep."

Kirk hesitated, but Spock spoke into his chair pickup. "Are you sure about those four beacons, Lieutenant?"

"Positive, sir," came the reply, crackling with static due to the *Enterprise*'s damaged communications network. "It says here in the manual that they're fourth-degree amplitude broadcast, too, and were serviced only two years ago. You

should have picked up at least two signals well in advance of any potentially damaging energy surge."

"It seems most unlikely, Captain, that two recently serviced beacons of that type should fail simultaneously." Spock sounded unusually grim.

"True, Mr. Spock." Kirk chewed his lower lip, looked thoughtful. "Still, there can't be many ships passing this way. They *could* have failed."

"Possible, Captain," Spock conceded. "I am not denying that, only saying that the odds are large against it. Deep-space warning beacons are powered and designed to remain operative without inspection for a hundred years. That two of them should fail together in so short a time . . . I find that a difficult concept to accept."

"So do I, Spock. But at that moment that's one of only two possible explanations I can think of. And I don't like thinking of the other one."

"That the beacons were intentionally tampered with?"

"Yes. Although I admit that seems little more reasonable than a simultaneous double failure." He paused, then directed his voice to the chair pickup once more. "Starbase Twenty-Five . . . Are you still there, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir."

"Report that at least two of the four beacons and possibly more apparently have become inoperative."

"*Inoperative*, sir? But that's impossible also."

"There's no other explanation, Lieutenant. Not unless all our external sensors and communications equipment has been rendered completely useless." Uhura shook her head violently. "And I'm assured that's not the case.

"Put in a report and have Starfleet maintainance get a repair team out here to check those beacons as soon as possible." He paused, and added even though he knew the answer, "Could those beacons have been destroyed by an energy surge from the pulsar itself, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir. According to the manual here, those four beacons are Class-AA-shielded. Nothing short of a full nova would knock them out. I just don't understand this, sir."

"Neither do we, Lieutenant, although we have a suspicion and it's not pleasant. However"—he took a deep breath—"we are still on course for Briamos and expect to arrive slightly delayed but still within the time parameters set by the Briamosites. You can report that back to Starfleet Command for us."

"Will do, sir. And, sir?"

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"If there's negligence proven in this case, someone's going to pay for it."

"I have news for you, Lieutenant," Kirk replied. "If there's *no* negligence proven, someone's going to pay for this."

XII

Other than the unexplained incident involving the unbeaconed pulsar, the flight to Briamos was devoid of surprises. That pleased Kirk just fine. One near disaster before the conference had even been convened was quite enough.

Briamos's main system, containing two populated planets including the Briamosites' homeworld, was impressive. And Briamos itself was as beautiful a world as any in the Federation. Its twin world of Niamos, orbiting farther out, was smaller but equally attractive.

Clearly the Briamosites had not squandered the natural opportunities nature had given them. The deep-range scopes and sensors on the *Enterprise* indicated highly developed populations on both planets. With Niamos, an inhabitable world, hanging only seventy-five million kilometers off in space, the ancient Briamosites had been gifted with a natural reason for developing space travel.

While they did not possess warp-drive capability as yet, and journeys between the three close Briamosite solar systems involved—by Federation standards—unconscionably long times, the vessels that Kirk saw when they approached Briamos were superbly designed and very efficient-looking. So much so that Chief Scott was of the opinion that the Briamosite ships could be adapted to warp-drive technology, and therefore fast deep-space flight, with few modifications. No doubt that capability would be one of the first items the bargaining Briamosites would seek in deciding who to ally themselves with. But it would hardly be critical. Both the Federation and Klingon could offer Briamos high-speed FTL technology.

No, the Briamosite decision was likely to hinge on less definable reasons.

Five warships, each nearly as large as the *Enterprise*, drifted out of low orbit to greet them.

"We're being scanned and hailed, Captain," Uhura reported.

"Have a good time but check your weapons first," murmured Kirk as he admired the lines of the approaching ships, "Let's keep in mind that they're likely to be cautious at the same time they're displaying impatience. Put them through, Uhura."

The screen cleared instantly and they saw their first Briamosite. Their first live one, Kirk reminded himself. He had studied those features at lecture session after session. The actual sight, therefore, was expectedly anticlimactic. He now knew Briamosite features as well as those of M'ress, Arex, or any other nonhuman Federation race.

Since the screen proportioned everything, one couldn't tell from the portrait that the alien stood over two meters tall, this being the Briamosite average. Partly, the alien resembled a human being who had walked in front of one of those ancient amusement park fun-house mirrors (the one that made fat women happy by squeezing them to an unnatural thinness while stretching them to Watusi heights). The forehead was high, the head itself long and narrowed. But it was not a hollow-cheeked skull face. The Briamosites were thin, they were not living cadavers.

The one regarding them now did not smile. Neither did he frown. Not much could be told from that, one way or the other. Even sociologist Chu Leiski hadn't been able to learn much about Briamosite expressions during her limited sojourn on their world, and the shy people had been reticent to discuss the meanings of their occasional facial grimaces and twitches.

One thing they did know, Kirk remembered: as long as a Briamosite did not on first greeting show lower canines and groan softly, he or she was at least offering a neutral greeting.

The eyes were stretched like the rest of the gangling body. Ellipsoidal orbs peered out at Kirk, their pupils eerily small. As if to counterbalance the high, narrow skull the ears were wide pleated shapes like the wings of a bat, and roughly that size. They stuck out boldly at right angles to the nearly hairless pate. A three-centimeter-high gray fuzz ran in a straight line from the forehead down below the back collar, much in the fashion once favored by certain primitive Amerinds of Earth.

The figure spoke. Considering the small size of the mouth opening, the words that emerged sounded quite normal in inflection and pitch. Now that he was speaking, the Briamosite gestured freely with one hand or the other, hands which ended not in fingers but in four small, flexible tentacles, each tipped with a pointed claw painted a color different from that of its seven fellows. The ears moved also, in a manner which Kirk recalled from his notes as signifying friendliness. While the two arms were jointed much like human arms, the weaving boneless tentacles gave them a decidedly graceful, supple look.

As the speaker moved, the pins holding his toga to one high shoulder sparkled. Stripes which Kirk recognized as indicating rank ran across the upper folds of the garment. The skin beneath those folds was a light gray-green, hairless but definitely not reptilian in appearance.

"To you greetings, Captain Kirk of the Federation ship *Enterprise*. Am I—I am Colonel-Greeter Pliver here to welcome you to our system home and to conference." His ears swayed in agitation like those of a nervous rabbit. "Worried I was that you might not be here in time. You have arrived barely six vilvits the polite side of deadline."

"We're sorry, but we were delayed," Kirk explained quickly. Then he recalled the view that the Briamosite's portrait had replaced. "That's quite a welcome you've given us—five warships. You, Colonel-Greeter Pliver, make me feel like an honored guest. But all those weapons aimed in our direction kind of counter the effect."

"Apologies are extended," said Pliver.

At first Kirk thought the Briamosite might be struggling with an unfamiliar duty; but that impression had changed swiftly. Already Kirk was coming to regard the alien as a slickly professional diplomat the Federation Diplomatic Corps would have been proud to match wits with.

"We felt it necessary to provide an escort," Pliver continued smoothly, "for your own protection."

"Protection from what?" a new voice wondered. Kirk glanced back, saw McCoy emerge from the turbo-lift and stride onto the bridge.

"Hello, Bones. I was just going to ask that myself." He returned his attention to the viewscreen. "We can take care of ourselves," he said meaningfully. "Who do we need so much protection from?"

"Why, from mutual enemies yours, the representatives of Klingon. They have been here for," and Kirk thought he detected just a hint of reproach in Pliver's voice, "three days."

"Klingons . . . As I told you," Kirk went on, "we ran into some trouble on our way here. If you take a look at the damaged exterior of our ship you'll have some idea of why we were delayed."

"I have already noticed the damage, during your initial approach from deep space, on our scanners." He didn't sound particularly sympathetic, Kirk noted. "Most unfortunate. Assuming, I am, as little as we know about you of the Federation, that you are telling me a true story, Captain Kirk. I would hate to think that Federation of yours thought so little of us as to send a second-class damaged ship to represent them because it was not needed somewhere more important."

Almost, almost Kirk said the first thing that came into his mind. But he recognized it as a clever ploy, and a test. Pliver had deliberately baited him, testing his patience, his pride, his ability to maneuver mentally in a stressful situation.

Calmly, he replied, "The *Enterprise* represents the finest class of ships in current Starfleet operation, Colonel-Greeter Pliver. I assure you that our damage is as genuine as it was unwished. You may have the opportunity of inspecting it yourself, if you desire."

"Perhaps sometime during the conference," Pliver responded pleasantly, having tried Kirk and not found him wanting.

McCoy leaned close, was careful to keep his voice below pickup range. "They're a handsome people, Jim, if this one's any indication. And sharp operators." He turned, strolled casually toward the science station as Pliver, with an excuse, begged a moment's pause. No doubt to report the results thus far to his superiors.

"Five warships to protect us from the Klingons, eh? Mighty solicitous of our health, wouldn't you say, Spock?"

"I detect a familiar note of sarcasm in your tone, Doctor," the first officer replied. "The Briamosites, in preparing to ally themselves and their future with either the Federation or Klingon, are only exhibiting a cautionary xenophobia natural in such a situation. Clearly the presence of these warships is designed to insure that we do nothing unpleasant, should the conference not proceed in our favor. We would not, of course, but the Briamosites cannot be sure of that in their own minds. I am certain a similar escort surrounds the Klingon ship.

"While they do not possess warp-drive technology, from the appearance of their vessels and from Commander Scott's engineering analysis I would estimate they have ample firepower to blast any unruly visitor from their skies, be it Federation cruiser, Klingon, or both.

"Also, the presence of the warships constitutes an important show of force for Briamos. They naturally wish to impress us with their power and potential so that we will make our most generous offers of alliance and they will be able to obtain the best for their systems." Spock paused a moment, added, "I believe the presence of the five ships is best described by an ancient human saying once employed by the primitive tribes called nations. 'Showing the totem,' I think it was." There was a touch of disgust in the Vulcan's voice.

" 'Showing the flag,' " McCoy corrected him. "What's the matter, Spock? Didn't individual tribes on Vulcan ever show the flag?"

"Perhaps far in our past we did, Doctor," Spock conceded. "However, we disposed of our ritualistic slogans and totems much earlier in our racial history than humanity did."

Pliver returned to the viewscreen. "Your orbital coordinates are as follows, Captain. They have been transcribed for your own instrumentation systemology. You see, we have done our homework, too."

As always, there was no evident movement of the mouth beyond the minimum necessary to form the requisite words. But Kirk was beginning to relate certain significant hand and ear motions to what he had learned during the series of lectures at Starbase 25, and if he was interpreting them correctly now, it meant that Pliver had, in addition to his sleek diplomatic style, a well-developed sense of humor.

"I'm sure you have," Kirk complimented him. "We've heard a great deal about your energy and abilities." That ought to earn the Federation a diplomatic point or two, he thought. "Mr. Sulu, stand by to receive coordinates."

"Standing ready for input, sir. Standing by, Colonel-Greeter."

Pliver looked pleased and a little startled at being so acknowledged. His expression didn't alter, but he read the coordinates with a definite flourish. "These will place your ship in close proximity to the Klingon vessel, Captain."

"Just a minute," Kirk said hastily. "If we may have any preference as to orbital location—"

"It is preferred," Pliver broke in smoothly but firmly, "that the vessels carrying both ambassadorial staffs remain in the same area. This will simplify," he added reassuringly with a friendly wag of batlike ears, "communications and transfer of personnel from both ships to the place-of-conference. That is located in a small resort community a modest distance from our capital city. It is on the seacoast, which is a region I am told you should find pleasant. The climate may be somewhat warm for you, but not unduly so. It was determined at high levels that it would be best to hold the conference in one of our most desirable, exclusive recreational areas as opposed to a stuffy, formal official structure in some city crowded. Landing coordinates for shuttle or transporter will be provided shortly. Until then, Captain Kirk, a pleasant forward looking-to."

Pliver switched off. Kirk couldn't be sure whether that last twist of ears indicated expectation or downright friendship, but either would be a sign that this first contact had concluded successfully.

"End transmission, Captain," Uhura said formally.

A snicker sounded from close by the science station. McCoy wore a wide, half-sardonic smile. "I like the Briamosites already, Jim. Some of their top politicians have seen a chance for a free vacation, so they're going to hold it on the Riviera instead of in the capital, where their constituents could keep an eye on them—assuming they're ultimately responsible to a constituency, of course."

"I beg your pardon, Doctor. *The* Riviera? That is a generalized human term, an adjective and not a noun."

"It wasn't always, Spock. Long time ago, it referred to one specific site on Earth. Nowadays any coast area on any world that proves especially hospitable to settlement is known as a Riviera site. Putting this conference in the local version of it," McCoy chuckled, "is a sign of the Briamosites' humanness."

"Yes," said Spock, his disappointment evident, "I'm afraid you're right, Doctor."

McCoy responded cheerfully. "Don't worry, Spock. One day soon we'll run across a race that wants to join the Federation and behaves exactly like Vulcans."

"A day I look forward to, Doctor, with great anticipation," the first officer replied. "However," he added in a more analytical tone, "it appears that the Briamosites possess many admirable qualities. I am looking forward with interest to the conference."

"On that, we both agree," finished McCoy.

Under Sulu's direction, following coordinates given by the Briamosites, the *Enterprise* was moving slowly toward the orbital station assigned to it. The five Briamosite warships shadowed the Federation cruiser every kilometer of the way.

"What the Colonel-Greeter Pliver said about placing our ship and that of the Klingons close together in order to facilitate transportation and communication is undoubtedly true, Captain," Spock ventured conversationally. "At the same time, a superficial reason masks the real one."

"Oh, there was never any question in my mind about it, Mr. Spock." Kirk thoughtfully stared at the viewscreen, which showed two Briamosite warships shining between the scanner and the green-blue world farther below. "They want both us and the Klingons together, nice and neat and accessible, so they can keep an eye on us all with a minimum amount of worry."

"Approaching designated position, Captain."

"Thank you, Mr. Sulu. Let's see what our counterparts and fellow arguers look like."

Sulu switched on the forward scanners. A small dot appeared, barely visible against the great cloud-covered bulge

of the planet Briamos.

"Increasing forward magnification," Sulu declared.

The dot leaped at them. Sparkling in the viewscreen was a Klingon cruiser, analog to the Federation's *Constitution* class. It was an immaculate technological vision, hanging in space like an abstract jewel. Every centimeter of its surface shone brilliant and mirror-bright. The winged shape looked as if it had rested in a Starbase vacuum dock for months.

McCoy let out an appreciative whistle.

"She really shines, Jim. The Klingons must have polished her hull from bridge to engines."

Spock wasn't impressed. "I apparently have more confidence in the Briamosites than you do, Doctor, judging by your reaction. They seem too intelligent to me to be overawed by such superficialities as mere appearance."

"I tend to agree with you, Spock," Kirk continued grimly. "But you have to admit that with the damage we suffered from that pulsar we don't present a very impressive sight alongside that." He paused, leaned forward in the command chair, and squinted hard at the viewscreen.

"Jim, something the matter?" wondered McCoy.

"The ship." Kirk was lost in some thought of his own and spoke almost inaudibly. "I recognize that ship . . ." Then he sat back, added loudly, "The rogue planet, without a sun. The world of the illusion-masters who tested us—"

"We're being scanned, sir," Uhura interrupted, "by the Klingons this time."

"Yes. If they have a hailing signal out, acknowledge it, Lieutenant."

"They do, sir," she reported immediately. "Making contact."

A face formed on the screen; dignified, impressive, with a very un-Klingon bent toward humor. Most important of all, it was familiar. Dangerously familiar.

"Jim," McCoy whispered, "you're right. I remember the illusion-masters and our contest there. And . . . I remember *him*. Isn't that—?"

"Kumara," Kirk said sharply. "The Klingon I went to the old experimental Interspecies Academy with. Yes, that's him."

"The Klingons have clearly," added Spock, who also recognized the face, "chosen their best to represent them."

About that time the transmission must have cleared on board the Klingon ship, for the Klingon captain's eyebrows lifted in recognition. "Well, James Kirk. A surprise to see you again, Jim. Twice in the same year. A pleasure."

"One we could do without," grumbled McCoy.

Kumara glanced to his right, eyeing something offscreen. "I am just studying my other forward scanners, Jim, as you approach. It seems that these Briamosites trust you no more than they trust us. I'm glad to see their suspicion isn't one-sided. I can tell you, it took quite an effort to stay diplomatic in the face of their arrogant reception for us. There are four warships boxing my ship. Two against nine, then, if anything should go wrong."

"You make alliances as fast as you break them, Kumara," Kirk replied tightly. "It seems to me you talk awfully confidently—and dangerously as well. How do you know they aren't monitoring this frequency?"

"Their vessels and civilization are impressive for a primitive race," Kumara admitted. "But we tested this with a shuttlecraft of our own several days ago. They do not possess the equipment to break in and eavesdrop on this particular frequency." There was a pause as the Klingon captain glanced at something or someone out of view and made a disapproving sound.

"Dear me, Jim," he said when he turned his attention back to the screen pickup, "it appears that your ship has suffered a considerable amount of damage. Not very appealing to look at, I can assure you. What happened?"

"We were caught," Kirk said slowly, seeing no reason to conceal the matter, "in a wavicle barrage from a variable pulsar. A supposedly beaconed variable pulsar. The damage almost was severe enough to keep us from arriving here in time for the conference." He leaned forward again. When he spoke, his voice had assumed a low, threatening undercurrent of accusation. "I don't suppose, Kumara, that you have any idea what caused those beacons to malfunction?"

The Klingon captain looked offended. "Am I expected to know the position and disposition of every petty Federation navigational device? I sympathize with your concern, naturally."

"Of course you do," murmured McCoy sotto voce. "We can see that you're all broken up over it."

"So you had nothing to do with it, then?" Kirk persisted.

"To say that my ship was responsible for the destruction of an interstellar navigation beacon is inflammatory, besides being personally insulting, Jim."

"I could care less how you interpret it," Kirk shot back. "Did you destroy those beacons?"

"We destroyed no navigational beacons," Kumara replied with great dignity. Then he added in a slightly less formal voice, while finding something of extreme interest in the underside of his fingernails: "We were, however, patrolling routinely on our way to this conference through the fringes of the disputed territories. We did encounter a couple of malfunctioning fragments of space debris, hazards to navigation, actually, which we promptly eliminated so as to prevent the possibility of an accident to any vessel of Klingon or Federation."

"Then you *did* blow out those beacons!" Kirk slammed a fist down on one arm of the command chair, glaring furiously at the calm face on the viewscreen.

"Hazards to navigation, Jim," Kumara corrected him.

"Your pardon, Captain."

"Who's that?" Kumara looked to the right on his screen, saw Spock's outline flickering in and out of his view. "Ah, the inimitable Commander Spock."

"I might remind you, Captain," said Spock flatly, "that the destruction of Federation property, in particular something of a nonmilitary nature such as a navigational beacon, is in direct violation of the Klingon-Federation subsidiary articles of peace as appended to the Treaty of Organia."

Kumara shook his head, looked very tired. "I told you and will tell you for the last time, gentlemen, that we destroyed no navigation beacons. We torpedoed several nonfunctional pieces of free-floating metallic debris, that's all."

"The beacons," Spock continued, as if the Klingon captain had said nothing at all, "would not have been broadcasting unless there was something to broadcast about. Specifically, imminent danger from a high-intensity burst of radiation from the pulsar they were placed around. So if you destroyed them at a time when no such outburst was imminent—and there is no other way you could have approached the beacons near enough to do so, without first receiving an all-clear from them—*then* you could say they were nonfunctional.

"Furthermore," the first officer continued, "to say in the first place that an object as small and low in mass as a beacon could present a hazard of any kind in the little-frequented section of space where they were located is absurd. A starship traveling at warp-drive would barely take notice of the impact a beacon-sized object would make against its meteoric shields as it disintegrated. And the chances of such a collision occurring are small enough to border on the infinitesimal."

"Ah," countered Kumara, wagging a cautionary finger, "but they are finite, Commander."

"That may be so," Spock began, "but—"

"And no matter how slight the possibility, we of Klingon always seek ways to improve the space lanes and make them safer for travel by any ship."

"Kumara," said Kirk softly, barely holding his anger in check, "I am reporting your destruction of both beacons to Starfleet Command. An official protest will be registered with the imperial government, and—"

"Oh, come now, Jim," the Klingon captain chided him. "Why waste the power? There's no way you can prove that my ship was responsible for the so-called demise of your precious beacons. In fact, there is no way you can prove we were even in the area, which," he added quickly, "we were not, of course."

"He's right, Captain." Spock looked disappointed. "Our claim is not supported by fact, only by supposition and deduction."

"Good enough for me, Mr. Spock," Kirk snapped, a mite testily.

"True, Captain, and for myself also. However, Starfleet will not regard it so. Certainly not enough to base a protest on,

one which could trigger a grave interstellar incident. There would be charges and countercharges, and without proof . . ."

"Spock's right, Jim."

Kirk didn't look around. "I know he's right, Bones. But this is one time I wish he wasn't."

"From what I can overhear of the discussion taking place around you, Jim, involving some of your officers, I would presume, you'd best heed their advice. They are quite correct. You can't do a thing." The Klingon captain sounded very pleased with himself.

"On the other hand, Kumara," Kirk mused dangerously, "I could apply inferential logic of my own regarding the destruction of the beacons and use that as grounds on which to take appropriate retributive action."

Kumara's veneer of good fellowship—never thicker than need be—abruptly vanished. So did his air of affected courtesy. No longer did he resemble some peculiar hybrid. He had turned thoroughly Klingon in expression and manner, although his reply was still more controlled than the average Klingon captain would have managed, considering the implications of the threat Kirk had just made.

"If it's a fight you're looking for, Jim, we'll be most happy to oblige you."

"No." Kirk leaned back in the command chair, satisfied at the result his warning had produced. "I was just getting tired of that oily grin of yours."

As if on cue, the expression in question reappeared. "Which oily grin, Jim? This one?" Kumara had a real sense of humor, a genuine rarity among Klingons, making him all the more dangerous.

Now that Kirk had indicated he had no intention of opening hostilities, the Klingon captain once more relaxed. "No, naturally we cannot fight, Jim. This conference is far too important to interrupt with petty squabbling among ourselves. Of course, once our friends and allies the Briamosites learn firsthand of the natural, ingrained duplicity of the Federation, then with their numerous well-armed ships about to assist us, I might reconsider."

"Don't count on their help in anything, Kumara. They're not your friends and allies yet."

"In good time, Jim. Merely a formality, as you will discover. I have preparations to make. Until the conference, then . . .?" And without giving Kirk a chance to reply, the transmission from the Klingon cruiser terminated.

" '*In good time*,' " Kirk muttered, mimicking his Klingon counterpart. "In about twenty million years, maybe, but not before."

"I don't believe the Briamosites will be around in twenty million years, Captain," Spock pointed out philosophically. "Most species are—"

Kirk sounded tired. "I don't think they will either, Mr. Spock. I wasn't being serious. I only meant to say that—never mind. Obviously Kumara destroyed those beacons. They have an excellent intelligence service. Undoubtedly they knew we were coming and which direction we were coming from: Starbase Twenty-Five.

"With that in mind, they eliminated the beacons so we wouldn't know when the pulsar was going to emit a dangerous outburst of radiation. All of which was intended to prevent us from attending the conference. They could have canceled the beacons and, traveling at maximum velocity, still have arrived here three days ago as Colonel-Greeter Pliver informed us.

"You saw Kumara's first expression, Bones. He wasn't expecting us to show up at all. Thought the pulsar would finish us." Kirk smiled grimly. "Well, we've a few more surprises we can spring on him."

"The important thing is that we're here," McCoy pointed out. "We'll outmaneuver Kumara at the conference. Klingons have a bulit-in aversion to diplomacy that will eventually undo their standing in the eyes of the Briamosites. That's for sure."

"Not entirely sure, Doctor," Spock cautioned. "One must realize that this Kumara is not a typical Klingon. He appears capable of subtlety and even courtesy. Furthermore, there is the unsightly condition of the *Enterprise*. The damage we have sustained has already given the Klingons the first few points with the Briamosites."

"I still can't buy that, Spock."

"If you have studied the recordings of the lectures given at Starbase Twenty-Five, Doctor, you will recall that the Briamosites attach a good deal of importance to personal appearance." He indicated the main screen, which once again showed a view of the gleaming Klingon cruiser. "A detail to which Captain Kumara and his crew have clearly paid much attention. The contrast between his vessel's appearance and that of our own can only be to his benefit. Remember," he added after a pause, "humans originated the ancient saying about the importance of first impressions."

"Mr. Spock, even the Briamosites will pay most attention to the last impression. That will be the critical one, and we have something very impressive to demonstrate the power of the Federation with. That." He pointed to the corner, where the empty Slaver stasis box rested unobtrusively.

"The artifact, Captain? You still intend to employ trickery to convince the Briamosites that the box is unopened and untouched?"

"I do, Mr. Spock. Toward the Briamosites *and* the Klingons. You know firsthand what a Slaver stasis field looks like. Surely you and Mr. Scott can build a small device which can fit inside the box and simulate such a field?"

"As I mentioned once before, Captain, that should not be too difficult." Spock still didn't appear enthusiastic about the idea.

"No one will test the field," Kirk pointed out, seeking to convince his first officer, "because the only sure way to do that would be to open the box, and none of the Klingon delegation is likely to be lugging a nullifier around."

"You really think the box will be that impressive to the Briamosites, Jim?" a dubious McCoy asked.

"I do. Not just the presence of the box, Bones, but the fact that we would bring it down to an alien world with us, just to demonstrate our friendship. The Briamosites are very sophisticated, remember. We can't risk thinking of them as an inferior race. In straight intelligence they're likely to be the equal of any member race in the Federation. They have everything but warp-drive technology.

"I'm sure they know about Slaver stasis boxes, if only by reputation. So I'm expecting them to react toward our box exactly as we'd react if some strange people came to negotiate with *us*, carrying an unopened stasis box like a loaf of bread, purely for us to admire.

"It'll be even more impressive," he went on enthusiastically, "because we've brought a stasis box knowing that Klingons will be present. That fact should impress the Briamosites more than the presence of the box itself. A lot more than a shiny ship!" He smiled expectantly. "Kumara will be even more impressed and surprised than the Briamosites—just as I would be if he'd brought an unopened stasis box with *him*."

"We have no formal treaty as yet with the Briamosites, Captain," Spock reminded him. "What certainty have we that they will not attempt to take the box for themselves? Revelation of our prevarication when they find the box is empty and its field a fake could drive them into the Klingon orbit permanently."

"If they steal the box, Mr. Spock, I'm not sure they're the type of people the Federation would want as fellow citizens anyway. But I don't see that happening. Too many imponderables. For one thing, I don't think they have enough familiarity with stasis fields to construct a stasis nullifier."

"Klingons do," McCoy observed. "They could simply ask the Klingons for help in opening the box."

Kirk grinned triumphantly. "And there's the catch, Bones. Just because they steal the box from us doesn't mean they'd want an alliance with Klingon. Furthermore, in order to gain Klingon aid in opening the box, the Briamosites would have to trust it to Kumara's care more or less.

"While the Briamosites have a lot of firepower ringing both the *Enterprise* and Kumara's ship, it's still possible that either of us could outrun them before they could seriously damage us. And I don't think the Briamosites are naïve enough to trust Kumara with a stasis box, either stolen or one of their own.

"Besides, theft of a stasis box from us would be tantamount to an excuse for war on the part of the Federation. As advanced as their civilization is, I don't think the Briamosites

are ready militarily to take on either Klingon or the Federation, and I believe they're realistic enough to know that.

"No, their best bet is to be truthful and straightforward throughout the entire conference, to play fair with both sides and not risk their whole future on something silly like stealing an archaic alien artifact. They might envy us the stasis box, but I don't see them chancing all their hopes on a single theft."

"Kumara won't feel that way, Jim," McCoy continued.

Kirk shook his. head. "Yes he will, Bones. Consider: If he tries stealing the box, he'll have to do so in front of, or at least with the knowledge of, the Briamosites. That would constitute a breach of Briamos's neutrality, not to mention an insult to every high Briamosite official attending the conference. The result would be to drive Briamos into the Federation."

"I see now." McCoy nodded slowly. "You're planning this whole incident with the box, half hoping the Klingons *will* steal it."

"That's the idea, Bones. Of course, once Kumara discovers that the box has long since been opened and emptied, he'll come running back to Briamos squealing in outrage about the treachery of the Federation and its deceitful minions—that's us. But by then it'll be too late, if I read the Briamosites correctly. If I've learned anything about them from all those lectures, it's that they're basically a decent, honorable people. Once offended by the Klingons, I sincerely believe they'd remain firmly allied to the Federation, no matter what Kumara might claim after the fact."

"Which makes it all the more important for us to convince them to join with the Federation, Captain, in the event that Kumara does not try to steal the stasis box," Spock reminded them both.

Kirk turned in the command chair. "I'm not arguing that, Mr. Spock. How long will it take for you and Scotty to concoct something to put inside the stasis box that will simulate a Slaver field?"

"In our spare time, Captain?"

"No, this is a priority assignment, Mr. Spock. You should begin immediately."

"Very well, though the entire idea still strikes me as tending too much to the childish . . ."

"So was the Trojan Horse, Spock."

The first officer didn't reply as he walked over and picked up the box of Slaver metal. After a brief examination to refamiliarize himself, he turned to Kirk and said, "I estimate three hours to plan the device and design the schematics and another three or four to build and install it in the box."

Kirk looked satisfied. "Fine, Spock. Go to it."

Spock headed for the turbolift.

As events developed, it was fortunate that the first officer's estimates about the time required were accurate. Colonel-Greeter Pliver called now to inform them that the first meeting of the conference had been scheduled to take place at 0900 ship-time the following morning.

Later, when the device had been designed and computer-tested, Spock was able to leave the details of construction to Scott and his engineering staff and head for his cabin—to sleep, and with worried thoughts about the critical conference ahead . . .

XIII

The Federation delegation consisted of four smartly dressed officers: Kirk, Spock, Sulu, and Uhura. They met in the main transporter room the following morning.

"This first meeting will probably consist mostly of introductions," Kirk was saying as the four walked toward the transporter alcove. "You know: 'Captain Kirk, meet the esteemed president of Briamos's second stellar system. Esteemed President, First Officer Spock. Captain Kumara, greet Captain Kirk,' and so on. Everyone says much, means little, and generally uses the opportunity to size up his counterparts. But just because no vital issues are likely to be discussed doesn't mean this opening meeting isn't important, Mr. Sulu." The helmsman, who had been sunk partly in his own thoughts, looked startled.

"Your collar is folded in on the left side, Mr. Sulu," Kirk said sharply. "Straighten it."

"Yes, sir." Sulu hastened to do so. "Do you think the Briamosites care enough about appearances to have researched our uniforms so they can check on our individual appearances?"

"I don't know, Mr. Sulu," Kirk said easily. "They might not know a Starfleet dress uniform proper from an engineer's work coveralls. But," he added quietly and meaningfully, "*I* do."

The helmsman double-checked his straightened collar.

All four officers looked splendid in their dress uniforms as they stepped up into the transporter. Spock carried the Slaver stasis box in both arms. The box was bathed in a delicate blue aura; in appearance it was indistinguishable from the cerulean halo the originally unopened box had been enveloped in when Spock had first seen it back on Gruyakin VI.

Second Engineer Dastagir was manning the transporter console. Kirk turned to him. "Engineer, you have the

coordinates for setting down which the Briamosites provided for us?"

"Yes, sir," came the ready reply. "Already programmed into the computer, sir. Ready when you are."

Kirk nodded once. The four officers assumed a waiting stance on four separate disks in the alcove. As soon as they were properly positioned, Kirk signaled to Dastagir. The second engineer initiated transport.

Gradually the four stiff figures were replaced by four pillars of flickering metallic iridescence. The figure-pillars began to fade . . . and coalesce . . . and fade again. And coalesce again.

Startled, Engineer Dastagir hurriedly checked dials and readouts. Everything read normal, all instrumentation reported proper functioning, yet . . . the four columns of energy had still not vanished. There was such a thing as abnormally slow transport, affected sometimes by a surge-delay in the transporter equipment, sometimes by localized planetary effects. But as the seconds slid away, Dastagir could rule out either of those possibilities.

Something sparked from the console. A nervous, crackling sound filled the room. Fragments of multi-hued energy broke from the four fluctuating pillars and appeared to drift between them, filling the transporter alcove with an illusion of rainbow snow. Pops and snarls filled the room as confused mechanisms growled in frustration at one another.

Within the alcove the four figure shapes were oscillating wildly now. At the strongest point of coalescence the four officers were discernible down to individual characteristics. At the weakest, when they had become amorphous cloud forms, they seemed almost to blend into a single glittering sphere.

Frantically Dastagir threw switches, overrode, backed up, compensated for. Oscillation intensified but transportation did not take place.

Faced with a disaster of frightening proportions, Dastagir did the only remaining thing he could. He threw the emergency control which would freeze energy levels within the transporter alcove in their present mode. Additional power flowed on request into the transporter mechanisms to lock the

four fluttering, uncertain figures within the alcove in place, together with the indistinct swirl of energy surrounding them.

Once the control had been cut in, nothing changed. The four figures neither coalesced nor grew any dimmer. Energy levels held suspended. That gave Dastagir time to do what any intelligent engineer in his position should have done: call for help. Sweating, fumbling at the intercom control, he waited anxiously for a reply.

It came promptly, its calmness contrasting violently with his own excited, anxious self. "Bridge here. Commander Scott speaking."

"Commander, sir, this is Dastagir Engineer Second, down in the main transporter room, sir."

"Slow down, Dastagir." Scott had immediately detected something in the usually imperturbable engineer's voice. He sat a little straighter in the command chair. "Trouble?"

"Yes, sir, I've locked them on emergency hold and—"

"Calm down! *Exactly* what's the matter?" A horrible suspicion was forming in the chiefs mind. "Did the captain and the others get down yet?"

"No, sir, that's just it. And I don't *know* what's the matter. I've double-checked everything and the transporter insists it's functioning properly and it's not—" Dastagir stopped, caught his breath, rambled on rapidly. "I had the Briamosite coordinates programmed in and was beaming-down Captain Kirk and the other officers when something went haywire."

"Haywire's not an acceptable engineering term, Mr. Dastagir," said Scott sharply. "Elaborate."

"As near as I can make out there's something producing a field distortion in the transporter, sir. I couldn't beam them down and I can't pull them out of it, so I threw in the emergency lock. They're field-frozen now. And there's something else happening I've never seen before, some kind of energy-matter interaction taking place on the transporter itself."

"So you threw the field lock?"

"Yes, sir." Dastagir sounded desperately unhappy. "It was all I could think of to do."

"Don't . . . do . . . anything . . . else," Scott ordered Dastagir, spacing the words out for extra impact. "I'll be right there." The chief engineer hit the off switch on the intercom, spoke toward the navigation-helm console. "Mr. Arex?"

The Edoan looked back at him. "Yes, sir?"

"Assume command. We're experiencin' a malfunction with the transporter the captain's usin'."

"How bad?" asked Arex, worried.

Scott was already racing past communications and a curious M'ress on his way to the turbolift. "It doesn't sound good. I canna tell for certain until I see for myself."

Once inside the lift car, Scott pressed the emergency override. This sent the car directly to the transporter room, bypassing all other demands on the car's service and producing puzzled stares from several waiting crew members scattered about the ship as their anticipated lift went racing past their respective call stations without stopping.

As the chief entered the transporter room his gaze went first to the alcove. He saw the flickering silhouettes of sparkling wavicles fluttering on the four transporter disks, noted the energetic abnormality coloring the air around them.

Those observations were superficial. The real definition of what lay within the alcove would be found in readouts and dials on the instrument console. He was checking them out immediately, balancing their stubborn readings against the impossibilities registering visually within the alcove.

Dastagir stood helpless to one side, watching, ready to assist if he was needed.

"Any sign of any unusual activity in the mechanisms before the trouble became apparent, Mr. Dastagir?"

"No, sir," the distraught engineer replied, hands clenched tightly at his sides. "I tried readjusting the matrix, canceling the initial input—everything I could think of. Nothing worked. They just continued to oscillate." He licked his lower lip, gazed at the alcove. "It's the blurring of the field parameters that has me really worried, sir."

"Probably nothing to get excited about," Scott lied. "Get Dr. McCoy and a medical team up here." He nodded in the

direction of the alcove. "They might need some dressin' up when we bring them back."

If we bring them back, he added silently to himself. Better not even consider that.

He took a handful of tools no less intricately formed than McCoy's surgical instruments and dropped to a prone position, on his back. Once the base panel in the console was off, he slid his head inside, reached in and up with boths hands, and set to work on circuitry no less sensitive than the organic variety McCoy operated on.

At Dastagir's request, and explanation, Dr. McCoy, Nurse Chapel, and several meditechs arrived in the transporter room several minutes later. All of them stared dumbfounded at the particulate storm suspended within the alcove.

"Scotty, what happened?" asked an anguished McCoy.

"Don't know for sure, Doctor," Scott told him, his voice tinged with strain. His head did not emerge from the bottom of the console. "I'm tryin' to find out now."

"But Jim, Spock, the others—"

"They're no worse off now than they were when this started, Doctor," replied Scott. "Engineer Dastagir had the sense to throw a lock on the entire system when he couldn't figure out what was happenin'."

McCoy's thoughts were running down predictable paths. "The Klingons," he began furiously. "They've done something to—!"

"I dinna think so, Doctor," Scott's cautious voice broke in. It reverberated faintly inside the console. A couple of moments later he emerged, holding several strange-looking, gleaming tools in his right hand. Both hand and tools looked damp with a transparent fluid thicker than water and McCoy knew the engineer had been adjusting fluid-state switches.

"Damaged wavicle rectification system," Scott said tightly, wiping his wet palm on his pants. "I hope that's all it was. Those switches shouldn't ever bust, but once in a while they do. Our luck these took a bad moment to rupture." He turned to the console, put his tools down, and glanced briefly at Dastagir. "Let's bring 'em back, mister."

"Yes, *sir*." Dastagir moved to stand alongside the chief and assist, while McCoy, Chapel, and the rest of the medical team stood aside and looked on anxiously.

Dastagir threw a switch and Scott's hands moved simultaneously on familiar controls. The wavering, banshee whine of the transporter abruptly softened, steadied, and then strengthened. The background field of waltzing energies vanished, leaving only four cylinders of fire. Crackling and sputtering no longer issued from the console.

The four pillars in the alcove, intensified, melded into four recognizable, well-dressed figures. Scott meanwhile kept his attention fixed on one particular gauge. When its luminescent pointer reached a certain number, he threw a large switch.

All four figures solidified. The envelope of energy surrounding them vanished, and the whine from the transporter dropped to nothing. The four collapsed into various, sprawling positions on the alcove disks.

McCoy and the rest of the medical team were at their sides instantly, Scott and Dastagir a few seconds after. Scott leaned over the kneeling form of McCoy. The doctor had rolled Kirk onto his back and was passing a medical tricorder over the motionless form of the captain. Scott saw no visible damage, but he knew that any serious injury the officers might have suffered would probably not be easily noticeable.

McCoy started at the top of Kirk's head, grunted in what sounded like a gratified manner when he had reached Kirk's neck, and continued passing the compact device down the unconscious captain's body until it passed over his feet. A few readjustments to the instrument and McCoy repeated the pass, moving from feet to head this time. Then he relaxed visibly.

"He's all right," he told the expectant Scott, glancing back up and smiling in relief at the engineer. "Heartbeat, brain functions, involuntary muscular activity, everything, all his vital signs read normal—adjusting for his unconscous state, of course."

"Same here, Doctor," reported Nurse Chapel. She was bending over the lanky shape of Spock.

The reports were identical from the technicians examining Sulu and Uhura. "They're okay, then?" asked Scott.

"Looks like." McCoy rose.

Kirk's eyelids were beginning to twitch and his head to move from side to side. A low, tired moan escaped his lips. McCoy knelt again on one side and Scott on the other. Together they helped the groggy captain to his feet. Scott looked briefly at his wrist chronometer.

"If you can certify them all right, Doctor, we'll take them down to the bulk transporter."

"But the Klingons—" McCoy began.

Scott shook him off. "I told you, Doctor, the Klingons had nothing to do with this. Either it was unexpected but plausible equipment failure, or else we suffered some concealed damage from that pulsar outburst we rode out. And the captain has to be down on the surface within the hour, to attend that conference. Remember the Starbase lectures. The Briamosites make a religion of punctuality."

"But surely they'll accept a reasonable explanation for a delay, Scotty?"

"I wouldn't count on it. These people strike me as bein' basically good folk, but they've got their peculiarities. And I canna blame them for bein' nervous about this conference. If the captain and Mr. Spock and the lieutenants can be there on time, they've got to try and make it."

McCoy's reply was hesitant but positive as they supported the swaying Kirk. "I don't see why they can't go . . . so far, Scotty." Looking over a shoulder, he saw that the other three officers had also been helped to stand.

Under the doctor's direction, the four stunned officers were helped stumblingly out of the transporter alcove. Kirk walked like a man drunk, as if he couldn't find his balance. But by the time they had walked-carried him as far as the console, he shrugged off their support. Putting out both hands, he braced himself on the console, then turned, leaned against it, and raised his left hand to his forehead, wincing. His eyes opened, and he seemed to see them for the first time.

"Mr. Scott, Doctor McCoy . . . What happened?" There was an odd lilt to Kirk's otherwise normal voice, as if the captain

hadn't yet regained full control of all his faculties. Neither the chief nor McCoy paid much attention to it. After the disturbing experience of being frozen in a transporter field for an abnormal length of time, a few mild side effects were only to be expected.

Scott explained. "There was a malfunction in the transporter, Captain. Maybe due to damage received from that pulsar we encountered. We had put you all in limbo for a while until I could get it fixed. You gave us all a bad scare."

"Oh . . . I guess that explains it." Kirk paused, then frowned and stared at Scott. " 'Captain' . . . you called me 'Captain.' "

Scott and McCoy exchanged glances. "Naturally, sir," said Scott, as gently as possible.

"Are you feeling all right, Jim?" McCoy was watching Kirk closely.

"Jim?" Kirk's voice sounded a touch higher, more tenor, than usual. Part of that could be attributed to shock at his recent experience, but not all of it. "Why are you calling me that?" Now the captain sounded—and looked—a little scared.

"What else should I call you, Jim? What's wrong?" Privately McCoy was thinking: temporary amnesia. But no . . . Kick recognized his name and title, merely wasn't identifying with them. Something else was wrong, then.

The three officers stared at each other as if paralyzed, until a new voice broke in: "Scotty, Bones! What in the name of the seven black holes has happened?"

Both men turned together. Sulu was eyeing them in a most authoritative fashion. The helmsman released himself, started toward Scott and McCoy—and almost fell. Startled, he looked down at his feet, registered surprise and astonishment, and then came toward them again . . . walking carefully as if treading on eggshells.

"Jim? Sulu?" McCoy's dazed gaze switched back and forth between captain and helmsman.

Sulu's eyes traveled over his lower body. He extended both arms out in front of him, rotated them over and back. His hands went to his face, felt the features as would a blind man touching a friend. His eyes widened.

"Oh my god! What's happened to us? What's happened to *me*?" He gestured shakily toward the body of the captain. "If I'm Kirk, in Sulu's body, then who are you?"

"I'm Lieutenant Uhura, of course," replied Kirk's body, in that peculiarly modulated tone that was so like Kirk's normal voice yet wasn't. Then Uhura-kirk looked down at herself. She said nothing for long moments.

"I'm here, Scotty, Bones. In Sulu's body." Kirk-sulu eyed them both, amazed and stunned.

"It would appear," put in the voice in Lieutenant Uhura's body very calmly and rationally, "that while we were in the malfunctioning transporter field a part of each of us was switched."

"A most important part," Kirk-sulu agreed, staring over at the now-alien shape of his science chief. "That *is* you, Mr. Spock?"

The first officer spoke to them, from Uhura's body, with Uhura's voice. While the tones were unquestionably those of Lieutenant Uhura, the choice of words and flatness of speech were those of Spock. "It is, Captain." He started toward them, stumbled for one of the few times in his adult life, and moved on much more cautiously.

"It would appear, Captain," Spock-uhura said, addressing himself to Sulu's body, "that I am not quite myself." McCoy did a double-take—he was beginning to wonder who *he* really was—but Spock was serious as ever. The joke was unintentional. "That *is* you in Lieutenant Sulu's body."

"It's beginning to look so." Kirk-sulu still sounded overwhelmed by it all. Turning, he stared across at the stolid form of Mr. Spock, who was carefully inspecting himself, running hands over his body, head, and, most particularly, a pair of unfamiliar ears.

"Since everyone else has been accounted for . . ." There was no need to finish the comment. But the voice in Spock's body finished for him, and confirmed the inevitable. "Yes, it's me, sir," admitted Sulu-spock. "I feel so strange, sir. This body . . . so many subtle differences. I feel different, altered. Not ill, exactly. Just queasy."

"I would sympathize with you, Lieutenant," said Spock-uhura, "but at least you have ended up in a body of the proper gender. If you wish to compare unnatural feelings," and at that Spock-uhura glanced down meaningfully at its curvilinear form, "I believe mine far exceed yours. Nothing could feel more awkward than this. I find myself in a body of different sex and different race. I believe I can cope sufficiently with the mind, but the rest will take careful work."

"Don't count on being unique, Mr. Spock." Uhura-kirk was experimentally walking in a small circle, testing out a different arrangement of mass and new, more powerful musculature. "I didn't exactly end up in an easy-to-compensate-for container either, you know." She almost stumbled again, caught herself, then grinned.

"No wonder I nearly fell down the first time I tried to take a step, McCoy. The captain uses a longer stride than I'm used to."

"The question remains, what can be done to put us back where we all belong?" Kirk-sulu's attention was focused on the wide-eyed face of the ship's chief engineer.

Instantly, every other eye in the transporter room turned the same way.

Scott collected himself, thought a moment, and started to reply . . . to Uhura-kirk. Correcting himself, he shifted to address the body of Lieutenant Sulu.

"Nothing right away, I'm afraid . . . Captain," he told Kirk-sulu apologetically. Turning, he bent over and reached into the still-open console panel near the floor. He withdrew a small rectangle, about twenty centimeters long, which was filled with microcircuitry. It looked like a piece of metallic turf.

As he spoke, his fingers wove an intangible web over the battered, damp panel. "Everything that's been damaged on this I've either bypassed or replaced. The key to the personality-mind switch you've all experienced is locked in place on this panel.

"To put you all back to your original bodies, I've first got to figure out exactly what went wrong. Then I have to trace the one minuscule portion of the damage that produced the personality switch and change current flows, matching energy

levels and duration precisely all the way, mind you, so that when you go back into the transporter the personality changes will reswitch themselves without doing further damage to some other portion of your bodies or minds."

He let the panel dangle carefully from one palm. "It's not," he added meaningfully, "a five-minute job for a maintenance tech to perform with a hammer and chisel."

"Wait a minute," said an excited Sulu-spock. "The transporter computer bank holds memories of all our transporter patterns. Why can't we just go to another transporter, desolidify ourselves, and then have the right patterns punched into the transporter so that when we're recombined it will be in the correct pattern . . . and proper bodies?"

"I dinna think it's that easy, Lieutenant," Scott began to explain. "If you'd been completely dematerialized in the transporter and then fully rematerialized elsewhere, I might be willin' to try it. But that didn't happen. Only part of your patterns were switched, and it was before full dematerialization had taken place." He shook his head. "No, I dinna think it's a good idea. It might even make things worse than they are now."

"I don't believe any of us could stand that, Mr. Scott," said Spock-uhura.

"That's for certain," agreed Kirk-sulu. "Things are going to be hard enough to cope with as they stand." He faced Scott again. "I don't expect miracles, Scotty. How long before you can localize and repair the troubled sections?"

Scott glanced down at the tiny panel, which had suddenly assumed enormous significance. "I kinna say for certain, sir. At least a couple of days. I dinna want to take a chance with you all in the transporter until I'm sure as I can be that I've fixed it."

"A couple of days?" Uhura-kirk glanced down at her massive —to her—linear shape. "I don't know if I can handle a couple of days in this body, Mr. Scott."

"I'm afraid you'll have to, Lieutenant," said Kirk-sulu meaningfully. "We'll all have to."

"But what about the conference, sir?" she wondered.

McCoy nodded. "That's right, Jim." He checked his own chronometer. "You're supposed to be down on Briamos for the conference's opening session in two-thirds of an hour."

"They're expecting Mr. Spock and myself," noted Kirk-sulu. He pointed at first Uhura's body, then Sulu's. "That means that the four of us are still going to have to attend. It's too late to change designated envoys, and I don't think the Briamosites would accept anyone below captain's rank as a designated ambassador."

"But how are we going to manage, sir?" wondered Sulu-spock. "It doesn't seem possible."

"It *has* to be possible, Mr. Sulu. We can't ask for a postponement of the conference time without offending the Briamosites, and even if we could there's no guarantee that Scotty will be able to fix the transporter and put us back in our own bodies," and he added hastily, unable to leave so grim a thought without hope, "in a reasonable amount of time."

"What precisely do you propose, Captain?" Spock-uhura looked on with interest.

"Mr. Spock, the captain and first officer of the U.S.S. *Enterprise* will be present at this conference." His gaze wandered to his own body (how strange to be staring at a self that was not a mirror image), now inhabited by the personality of Lieutenant Uhura, and to that of Mr. Spock, in which Lieutenant Sulu was currently residing. "So will Lieutenant Sulu—that's me. And Lieutenant Uhura—that's you, Mr. Spock." Uhura's head nodded once. "What you and I do is not particularly important. We're lower-ranking officers, attending our superiors. We won't be closely watched.

"Mr. Sulu, you and Lieutenant Uhura will be acting as principals in this little play. So your imitations will have to be much more convincing. Mr. Sulu, at least you're in a body of proper gender, one not unlike your own in build and musculature." He turned his attention to his own ghost shape. "The success of this pantomime, Lieutenant Uhura, and of the entire conference, rests on your shoulders—even if they happen to also be mine." His own eyes were staring back at him expectantly. To his surprise, he found he had to repress a slight shiver.

"For one thing," he went on, "you'll be operating under the constant scrutiny of the Briamosites. Now, Captain Kumara knows me, but not intimately. I don't know how much he remembers in the way of personality traits and habits from our time together at the defunct Interspecies Academy. Probably not a great deal. But you'll have hormonal and other physical responses, the normal reactions of a male human body, to cope with. Some of them may surprise you at unexpected moments. Somehow you're going to have to act natural, nonetheless."

"I don't see that I'm going to have it that much easier, sir," objected a concerned Sulu-spock. "At least Uhura's in a human body. Talking about unexpected hormonal reactions, I'm in a Vulcan body. Already I'm feeling, well, itchy."

"It should not be overly difficult, Lieutenant," Spock-uhura insisted quietly. "All you have to do is act sensibly."

"That's easy for you to say, Mr. Spock," countered Sulu-spock testily.

"And you'll have to learn to control your facial expressions," Spock-uhura warned the lieutenant. "Those grotesque distortions of lips and mouth, the unnecessary head gestures must be eliminated if you halfway expect to . . . to . . ."

Spock-uhura halted in midsentence, staring at nothing in particular. "Most peculiar," the first officer finally murmured in Uhura's bell-like voice. He looked up at Dr. McCoy. "I presume, that my near outburst just then is what might be called an emotional response."

"Possibly, Spock. If so, it was very mild." McCoy considered carefully. "You raised your voice, but that's not necessarily an indication of emotional coloring."

Spock-uhura placed both hands against his forehead, winced at something that was not pain. "I feel most unusual, Doctor. My self appears reluctant to follow directions." Abruptly, the hands dropped and Spock-uhura looked at Kirk-sulu primly. "This is going to be more difficult than I first assumed, Captain."

"It's not going to be easy for any of us, Mr. Spock." Kirk-sulu sounded firm. "But it has to be tried. Otherwise Briamos

will ally itself with Klingon. I'm willing to chance anything to prevent that from happening.

"We have a couple of things going for us, however. Briamosites know very little of human behavior. Our ambassador," he added drily, "didn't strike me as your average human being anyway. So much of our seemingly aberrant behavior can probably be explained away, if we do anything awkward. It will be more difficult to fool the Klingons, but they think all humans are a little crazy in their behavior anyhow."

"That is not entirely a Klingon assessment," noted Spock-uhura pointedly. "The present situation would only tend to reinforce that belief."

"We might stall the Briamosites for an hour or so now, Mr. Spock." Kirk-sulu looked thoughtful. "We have to. We're going to need that hour to give ourselves a crash course in each other. But for several days? No, never." He walked over to confront his own body.

"Lieutenant Uhura?"

"Yes, sir," his own voice, but an oddly higher tenor, responded promptly.

"You are going to have to become me. At least, you're going to have to well enough to fool the Briamosites and the Klingons. At least our voices weren't switched. You're speaking with my vocal cords and my lungs. You've served as acting captain several times. This is another of those times, only you're going to have to be more than just acting captain. You're going to have to be Acting Captain James T. Kirk."

"I'll do my best . . . Lieutenant," she replied. Both of them smiled.

It was good to see himself looking so confident, Kirk thought a little crazily. He still felt as if he were talking in a dream. Any minute now they would all wake up, back in their own bodies, ready for the conference—everything all right again.

Then he realized his exuberance might be due in part to the fact that he was in a more youthful, responsive body. They would have to watch for subtle as well as blatant differences like that during the conference.

"We're all going to have to exercise some to get used to our new bodies," he went on. "Our strides, as Lieutenant Uhura has pointed out, are different now. So are our reaches. I can't have myself, meaning you, Lieutenant Uhura, reach for a stylus only to miss it and clutch empty air. Enough errors of that sort and sooner or later the Klingons would catch on that something's definitely wrong with us. Once that happened, they would find ways to take advantage of us, to our detriment regarding the Briamosites."

He turned to Spock's watching form. "As for you, Lieutenant Sulu, you're going to have to talk like a Vulcan, think like a Vulcan, act like a Vulcan."

"I'll manage somehow, sir," Sulu-spock replied calmly. "I mean," and he seemed to stand a little straighter, "I will endeavor to execute my assignment to the best of my abilities, Captain."

"There is no need to overdo it, Lieutenant," cautioned Spock-uhura mildly.

"Let's move to the main briefing room," Kirk-sulu instructed them. "We'll work on our individual acclimatizing there." He turned to regard the watching McCoy and Scott. "Scotty, you get to work on that panel." He indicated the tiny board which had caused all the trouble. "Requisition all the technical assistance you need."

"Aye, Captain. Maybe we'll get lucky." There was more enthusiasm in his voice than in his thoughts.

Kirk-sulu's gaze shifted. "Bones?"

"Yes, Jim."

"What kinds of side effects can we expect to encounter from now on?"

"Besides the obvious ones of getting used to a strange body, Jim, of walking easily and reaching normally and other physical activities, there may be mental shifts of the kind Mr. Spock just experienced." He looked helpless. "I can't predict what else might happen."

"I know that, Bones, but speculate the best you can."

The *Enterprise*'s chief physician thought a moment, aware of concerned eyes on him, eyes that were slightly haunted. "You personally shouldn't have too much trouble, Jim. You're

in a human male body not greatly different from your own. You might have to concentrate on restraining yourself in certain situations."

"Restraining myself how, Bones?"

"You're operating a considerably . . . well, not considerably," he hurriedly corrected himself, "but younger body than the one you're used to. It will react faster, move more rapidly than your own—as excellently conditioned as that one is.

"You already brought up reaching for something and coming up short. It works both ways. You have to be careful not to reach for something in a hurry. Your hands are liable to get there before your mind thinks they will. You could hurt or at least embarrass yourself."

"What else?"

"Listen. I think you can all cope with the physical changes," McCoy said convincingly. "It's the other problems that worry me. Your mind, Jim. How do you feel mentally? Can you remember everything?"

"Everything I try to," Kirk-sulu informed him.

McCoy looked pleased. "Then the personality transfer extends to full memory as well. That should make things easier. You'll have it easiest of all, Jim."

"What about the others?"

McCoy walked over, confronted Spock's body. "Lieutenant Sulu?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I wish I had some practical advice to give you, but I don't. How do you feel?"

"A little funny, Doctor. But it's not overpowering me. I can handle it." He frowned, then hastily wiped the expression from his face. "I just feel generally . . . well, not depressed, exactly. But dull—as if, as if I can't get excited or sad about anything. It's not that the laughter isn't in me. It's there, in my mind. But . . . for instance, I was trying to think of something funny to say just now, when you spoke about retaining our memories. I thought of an old joke that applies, and it's one that usually breaks me up. I recognized the

humor in it, recognized it's as funny as ever, but . . . I couldn't laugh."

"Vulcan control," said McCoy, without a trace of a smile. "Try, Sulu. Think of the joke again. I want to make certain your own mind isn't in danger of being submerged in something alien you can't handle. See if you can consciously override the endocrinal suppression."

Sulu struggled with himself. Then a faint smile appeared on the face of Mr. Spock. It widened slightly, and the first officer laughed. It was a little forced, but a laugh nonetheless.

"Please don't do it again, Lieutenant," Spock-uhura requested. "The unnatural sight makes me ill."

"I don't think he will, Spock," Kirk-sulu told his first officer. "Bones, does that convince you that Sulu will keep control of his thoughts?"

McCoy nodded.

"Good. From now on, Lieutenant Sulu, you're going to be a model Vulcan, aren't you?"

Sulu-spock nodded, once. "As phlegmatic and poker-faced as possible, sir."

Spock said nothing. McCoy turned, walked over to confront Uhura's form. He had to consciously lower his gaze, so used was he to staring *up* at the first officer.

"And what about you, Spock? How are you coping?"

"Adequately, Doctor," came the lilting response from Spock-uhura. "But some of the sensations I am experiencing are truly remarkable. It is an intriguing experience, one filled with ample opportunities for discovery. But I fear I may experience some physical difficulties, contrary to your primary concern over our mental reactions. My thoughts are reasonably lucid, my control over them seems firm. But this physical configuration is sufficiently, radically different from my natural self. I'm afraid I find it a bit clumsy."

"Clumsy?" Uhura-kirk looked upset. "What do you mean, 'clumsy,' Mr. Spock?"

"No offense is intended, Lieutenant. It is clumsy only to me. For example, I find that I must cope with a considerably different and to me not especially efficient distribution of

mass. It's a question of leverage and muscular control. I do not think I could ever master it, but I believe I will, with practice, be able to manage it."

"Speaking of distribution of mass . . ." Uhura-kirk began accusingly.

"That's enough, Lieutenant," Kirk-sulu said sharply. "You're not reacting the way I would, are you? You're the captain now. Don't forget it."

Kirk's face assumed an expression of embarrassment.. "Sorry, sir. I forgot myself, for a moment."

"If it helps," Kirk-sulu added with a grin, "consider your predicament a temporary promotion."

"If this is what I have to go through to make captain someday," Uhura-kirk replied with a shy little smile, "I think I'd just as soon stay in communications. Don't worry, sir," she finished briskly. "I'll make an efficient you."

"I'm sure you will, Lieutenant. Neither Kumara nor his staff knows us well enough to recognize personal idiosyncrasies, so your imitations won't have to be letter-perfect. The way I sometimes rest my chin on one hand when I'm thinking, for example." Uhura-kirk promptly placed her chin on her right hand and looked pensive, "Or the way Mr. Spock raises his eyebrows when something surprises or especially interests him." Sulu-spock promptly lifted both brows and assumed a distinctly supercilious look.

Kirk sounded pleased. "That's the idea, Lieutenant. Only keep Mr. Spock's comments in mind and don't overdo it. Better to act like a humanlike Vulcan as opposed to a caricature." He hesitated, then went on. "It'll be best all around for us to keep everything—our words, our movements, everything—as simple and brief as possible. That will help to minimize opportunities for error. Opportunities the Klingons can only turn to their advantage. Let's go."

He turned and headed for the turbolift, walking carefully and working to adjust his pace to Sulu's slightly different way of walking.

"Bones," he said, glancing back at McCoy, "if you can think of anything else we ought to watch for, let us know in the briefing room. And, Scotty, no matter where we are, even if

we're down on Briamos and in conference, you get in touch with me—meaning Lieutenant Sulu—the instant you've corrected the transporter and are ready to try switching us back."

"Aye, Captain, you can be sure I'll do that. Even if it means insultin' our sensitive friends the Briamosites."

Moving like a quartet of drunken ensigns on leave, the four officers entered the turbolift. When the doors had closed behind them and the telltale alongside indicated the car was moving on its way, Scott turned his attention from the wavicle rectifier to the introspective Dr. McCoy.

"Did you mean what you said, Doctor, about them being able to handle their transposition?"

"I didn't see any reason to be overly pessimistic, Scotty." He looked concerned. "But I don't know, I just don't know . . . There are several psychology tapes I've got to run through. In case any problems do arise, I want to be prepared to treat them as best I can. Let's just say," and he gestured at the little rectangle of complex circuitry Scott was holding so carefully, "that the best thing for them would be to fix the transporter and put all of them back in their own bodies." He turned, his gaze traveling to the turbolift doors behind which his fellow officers—and friends—had departed. "Dual-personality delusions are easily treatable, Mr. Scott, but when there's a physical as well as mental basis for a psychosis, then I can't help but worry . . ."

Neither officer said another word. McCoy led Chapel and the rest of the murmuring medical team into the returned turbolift. Scott turned to the second engineer standing expectantly nearby. He held the almost-dry circuit panel up to the light, turned it slowly over in his hands, tilting it this way and that. Then he lowered it, and sighed.

"Dastagir, tell Loupas and Krensky we've got a little job to do. Tell them I'll be right there to detail what's got to be done. Tell them to forget about their off-time. No one in Engineering's going off-time until this cursed piece of electronic guts is turned right-side up again."

"Yes, sir." Second Engineer Dastagir moved to the intercom to relay the chief engineer's instructions. Scott moved toward the turbolift doors.

And far below, the anxious Briamosites listened unhappily to the asked-for hour delay and wondered about the courtesy of their maybe-allies of the Federation . . .

XIV

Nearly an hour later the frenetic discussions filling the main briefing room were interrupted by an apologetic beep from the room intercom. Kirk-sulu moved to the desk, thumbed the receiver switch and acknowledged the call.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Mrr. Sulu, I—Oh, I'm sorrry, Captain. We werre told and it was all explained forr us, but—"

"Never mind, Lieutenant M'ress," Kirk-sulu told her. "No need to be embarrassed. Sometimes I get confused myself as to who I am now. It's hard enough for us to cope here." He looked back into the room at the three familiar and yet not familiar forms, all discussing matters of great import among themselves. "I'm not sure any of us are easy at mind. That's our problem, not yours. We have to convince the Klingons and the Briamosites, not our fellow officers."

"That's what I'm calling about, sirr," the communications officer purred. "We just rreceived communication from below. I spoke with that Colonel-Grreeterr Pliverr, the Brriamosite liaison? He was concerrned that ourr delegation had not beamed-down yet."

"Concerned or angry, Lieutenant?" Kirk-sulu asked.

"My imprression was of a perrson willing to extend concessions, sirr, but at the point of losing patience."

Kirk checked his, or rather Sulu's, wrist chronometer. "We still have a few minutes, according to the extension the Briamosites granted us, but Pliver has our interests in mind by reminding us, Lieutenant. Contact Pliver and inform him we're on our way to the transporter room and should be greeting him in person in a very few minutes."

"Yes, sirr. Brridge out."

Kirk clicked off, called for attention. The discussion ceased and the other three looked at him expectantly. "We're out of time. Mr. Spock." Sulu-spock nodded "Lieutenant Uhura."

Spock-uhura smiled . . . weakly. "Captain Kirk?" Uhura-kirk said, "I'm ready, Lieutenant."

Kirk-sulu looked grimly satisfied. "Let's go to the masquerade, then." He led the way to the door and they left the briefing room.

Kirk-sulu and Spock-uhura stopped in the hallway. The other two officers did likewise. There was an uncomfortable pause. Then Uhura-kirk muttered, "Oh," turned down the hall, and started for the turbolift. Sulu-spock fell in alongside her, his stride natural and seemingly unaffected. The two "lieutenants," as was proper, followed.

"That's better, Lieutenant Uhura," Kirk-sulu told her. "How are you handling me?"

"All right so far, sir," Uhura-kirk replied. Kirk still felt he was listening to an echo everytime she spoke with his voice, his lips. "But it seems a little more difficult to concentrate." They entered the turbolift. "It's fighting the tendency of my body to pull me one way, when my mind tells it to behave another. The hormone differences, I think. I keep feeling emotions that I know are unnatural . . . but for this body, they're perfectly natural."

"Your mind," Spock-uhura told her, "is battling the captain's instincts. We will have to be on constant alert against doing anything without thinking first. One of us could be in full mental control over our present bodies, but while thinking of something else that body might react naturally, producing an awkward situation. This is a war with ourselves. We must take care never to let down our vigilance."

The turbolift deposited them near another of the personnel transporters, on the opposite side of the ship from the damaged one. Scott awaited them there. He had left reconstruction of the critical panel to his subordinates long enough to handle the beam-down of the captain and the others personally, this time.

Uhura-kirk marched over to the console, said firmly, "All right, Scotty, we're ready for beam-down."

"Very good, Captain. I—" Scott stopped, startled, to stare in disbelief at the captain's face. "Are you—?"

"No, Scotty, I'm still over here, where you left me." Kirk-sulu gestured with a hand. "You're speaking to Lieutenant Uhura."

"What do *you* think, Mr. Scott?" Uhura-kirk asked hopefully in the captain's familiar voice.

"I think," a dazed Scott muttered, "I'd better get that wavicle rectifier fixed in a hurry or there won't be a sane person left aboard this ship." He waved an arm weakly. "Go ahead, I'm ready."

The four officers moved away from the console and took their places in the transporter alcove,

"Is there a possibility, Mr. Scott," wondered Spock-uhura, "that we could be reintegrated into our proper forms when we emerge on Briamos?"

Scott shook his head slowly. "I seriously doubt it, Lieu—Mr. Spock. There's no question that in order to return you all to your own bodies you have to be reassembled through the altered path of the original rectifier. But if it means anythin'," he added, "I hope I'm wrong, Mr. Spock, and you're right."

"We can hope," Kirk-sulu murmured as the chief engineer energized the transporter.

"I hope you set down in a nice, quiet chamber somewhere where initial observation will be by as few Briamosites as possible, Captain," Scott said. Kirk barely had time to nod Sulu's head as the transporter took effect.

He felt the usual disorientation, the blurring of vision and thought. It was joined by an unexpected sense of fear. But it passed, and along with it Kirk's momentary worry that their experience had given them all a phobia against using transporters.

They rematerialized on the surface of Briamos. Kirk started to slump, caught himself—and stood erect more rapidly than he normally would have. Since he had been learning the past hour to compensate for a strange body, handling the slightly higher gravity of Briamos was easy. He saw the others adjust with equal swiftness.

Sadly, Spock did not get his wish. Unspoken exchanges between him and his companions indicated that they were still firmly ensconced in the wrong bodies.

Nor was the chief engineer's hope fulfilled. Instead of the nice, quiet reception room they had all hoped for, they found themselves standing on a tall reviewing stand covered with a green canopy and lined with pennants and banners, facing four tall, attenuated Briamosites, whose slimness was accentuated by their attire, making them resemble more than ever animated scarecrows.

All four aliens were elegantly clad in bright emerald uniforms. Red striping sliced across the lower third of both jacket and pants legs. They wore, male and female alike, decorative tiara crowns. Each of these was cocked at a different but rakish angle on their high skulls, and sparkled with multicolored cabochons of different stones. Whether the tiaras were a badge of office, a sign of rank, or simply an article of clothing Kirk couldn't decide.

Less attractive by far were the five figures standing on the other side of the Briamosites. Captain Kumara was flanked by four of his own officers. They wore their own dress uniforms and were a blaze of barbaric design and color. Perhaps they were more colorful, Kirk mused, but they were certainly less dignified, even a bit childish. Whether they would appear so to the Briamosites, of course, was another matter.

Kumara made a Klingon sign of greeting, smiled slightly at Uhura-kirk. "Greetings to you, Jim. We were worried that you wouldn't be able to join us."

"Hello, Kumara," Uhura-kirk said, even as Kirk caught himself. He had almost replied to the greeting. The transition from the familiar surroundings of the *Enterprise* to this vast open plain and reviewing stand had been abrupt enough to unbalance his carefully prepared Sulu-image. He had spent so much time helping Uhura learn to act like himself that he'd nearly slipped up. Fortunately, Uhura *was* prepared, and she'd handled herself well already.

"In fact," she added, "I was worried about how depressed you'd become if we didn't arrive. You are sure you're feeling all right?"

Kumara responded with a tight-lipped little smile.

Kirk felt a surge of elation inside. Kumara showed absolutely no suspicion that anything was wrong. They just

might carry the incredible impersonations off—if their luck held.

"Greetings to you, Captain Kirk." Kirk recognized the by-now-familiar face of Colonel-Greeter Pliver as the tall Briamosite moved to gesture at Uhura-kirk. "Sorry are we for whatever problem delayed you from arriving at the appointed time, and certain am I that it will not so trouble you again."

This was a veiled warning about punctuality, Kirk knew, which they'd better heed. They had already presumed on the Briamosites' version of courtesy once. Another such request would push them into the poorly understood realm of local insult.

"We had some trouble with one of our transporters," Uhura-kirk explained truthfully, without going into details. "I'm sure it won't happen again. Our delay bothered us as much as it did you, Colonel-Greeter. If there's one thing I can't stand it is people who can't keep their appointments."

A derisive snort sounded. It came from the knot of Klingon officers around Kumara.

"It's not," Uhura-kirk went on, "that we had any desire to minimize the pleasure of your company, you understand. It was only that our transporter operator disobeyed orders. He was reluctant to inflict the distasteful company of certain others on us. The person's intentions were worthy, but his insubordination could not be tolerated." She glanced toward the Klingons and made a face. Kirk was amazed at how disgusted he could look when he wanted to.

Her insinuations struck home. One of the Klingon officers bridled at the hidden insult, but was restrained by a dour Kumara. A tall Briamosite standing behind Pliver made a small muffled sound that Kirk took to be local laughter. He forced himself to keep from smiling. Uhura's story had not only explained away their hour-long delay, it had apparently made them the first winners in the exchange of greetings. Of such tiny asides were powerful alliances forged.

"This is Sarvus, Leader of all the Briamosite systems, final arbiter of multiple-world decisions." Pliver introduced them to the elegantly appointed, two-and-one-half-meter-tall Briamosite who had stifled his laughter at Uhura-kirk's comment. "And Vice-Leader Chellea," Pliver continued,

indicating the tallest member of the naturally towering alien delegation.

Leader Sarvus stepped forward, leaned like a willow to his right. His right arm curved downward to slap lightly against his slim right thigh.

"Pleasure in making your acquaintance," said Uhura-kirk. Kirk watched as his own body imitated the formal Briamosite bow-and-greeting, arm hooking down, back of the hand rapping the thigh. Uhura had gained considerable command of Kirk's musculature by now and she performed the subtly difficult movement with admirable smoothness.

Kirk started to relax just a little. Inspection showed that Kumara and his companions still suspected nothing. He found himself really believing that they just might be able to bring off the masquerade.

Uhura-kirk turned to face him and Kirk forced Sulu's body into an attitude of attention. "My executive officer, Mr. Spock." Sulu-spock stepped forward, nodded slightly in typically perfunctory Vulcan fashion, and said nothing. That was just as well, and in accordance with their plans prior to beam-down.

Uhura, occupying Kirk's body, would be forced to do a lot of talking. But there was no reason why the rest of them couldn't remain as quiet as possible. The less they said, the fewer the opportunities for making a fatal mistake.

"My helmsman, Lieutenant Sulu," Uhura-kirk went on. Kirk stepped forward, felt his strange body bow respectfully. "And communications chief, Lieutenant Uhura." Spock manipulated Uhura's body, stepping forward to bow and in the process nearly falling over. Clearly he still hadn't quite mastered the intricacies of feminine musculature, particularly that of Lieutenant Uhura, which would require more adjustment to handle than the average female form.

He caught himself, dropping to one knee and then rising hastily before falling flat on his face. Kirk forced himself not to move. Instead, he watched for the expected reaction among the Klingons—and got a pleasant surprise. None of them were looking in his direction. They were chattering softly among themselves and hadn't noticed Spock's slip.

But why should they be paying attention? Kirk reminded himself. Uhura and Sulu were only subordinate officers, hardly worthy of notice. Kirk and Spock had already been introduced. Kumara was looking over a shoulder and conversing with one of his aides. Maybe their present situation would have more advantages than disadvantages, Kirk mused. He and Spock could observe the Klingons closely, without being subjected to similar attention. Kumara and his associates would be watching their original bodies, now inhabited by Sulu and Uhura.

He tried to overhear their whispered conversation, and failed. It didn't seem important, though. One of the officers was smiling the particularly unhumorous Klingon smile. Certainly there was no sign they regarded Spock-uhura's slip as anything other than a simple stumble.

Nor did the near fall appear to have bothered the Briamosites. Perhaps they weren't quite as sensitive as Kirk had been led to believe.

"Leader Sarvus will now speak," announced Colonel-Greeter Pliver portentously. This was the signal for Klingon and Federation officers alike to forgo their own conversations and stand attentively.

The Briamosite leader withdrew a small book from one breast pocket, opened it to the first page, and began to read. The speech was long, but the pages turned quickly. It was a carefully worded, thoughtfully prepared speech. It expressed feelings of friendship for both the Federation and Klingon peoples, declared a desire for extensive future relations of mutual benefit, and promised not so much as a grain of sand to either side in return for concessions and benefits the Briamosites were seeking for themselves.

Clearly the local precepts of diplomacy were as fully evolved as Briamosite technology. They were in no hurry to join either the Federation or Klingon, and it would take considerable persuasion to change their minds. Nor could they be fooled. But Kirk knew that the pressures both sides were bringing to bear on Briamos to join one side or the other would eventually force them to do so.

The Leader finished, closed the back of the tiny book. There was silence. The Briamosites appeared to be waiting for

something. Uhura-kirk turned, glanced back helplessly at Kirk, which was a mistake, though it would probably have been worse for all of them to continue facing each other quietly, grinning like idiots.

Kirk knew what should be said. "Yes, sir, a wonderful feeling which we would greet our hosts with in kind," he murmured expressionlessly. Uhura recovered quickly, turned and repeated what the captain had just said, in somewhat different words so that it wouldn't smack of an echo.

But the damage had been done. As Uhura-kirk spoke, Kirk saw Kumara eyeing the "captain" uncertainly. Kirk began to sweat, though it did not show.

"And so we thank you for your magnificent welcome, Sarvus of Briamos," Uhura-kirk was saying. Kirk felt the words sounded a little stilted, but he doubted the Briamosites would notice. "We extend to all of Briamos and its sister worlds the best wishes and hopes of the United Federation of Planets. I, too, hope that our future dealings may always be this pleasant, enjoyable, and relaxed, and that together we may continue as equals to extend civilization a bit farther into the galaxy."

Kirk let out an internal sigh. Uhura had remembered all the speech, once he, as Sulu, had jogged her memory. He'd kept the formal reply purposefully short, eliminating many flowery phrases the psychodiplomats at Starfleet Command had thought would appeal to their hosts. The couple of sentences were enough—and Uhura had still almost forgotten them entirely.

The Briamosite officials appeared satisfied, though, despite the brevity of Uhura-kirk's response. As she had recited the speech, Kirk had seen the initially suspicious Kumara relax and lose his puzzled expression. But . . . it had been a near thing.

His worst suspicions were confirmed as soon as Uhura finished. Kumara was always more dangerous when relaxed. "It looks like you're not feeling too well, Jim," he murmured to Uhura-kirk. "A bit nervous, perhaps?"

"As a matter of fact," Uhura-kirk replied quickly, "my big problem is that I might be too relaxed, Kumara. I don't have anything to be nervous about . . . unlike some people I know."

The speed of her response was good, but the wording sounded a touch bitchy to Kirk, and was hardly the way he would have replied. But it seemed to serve where it counted most, among the Briamosites. They sensed strength instead of Kumara's implied uncertainty. Fortunately, Kumara didn't have a chance to follow up his initial accusation, or he might have succeeded in rattling Uhura.

Colonel-Greeter Pliver stepped physically and verbally between Kumara and Uhura-kirk. "We have prepared a parade somewhat. We call them something else, but 'parade' will serve. This is our way of displaying for you, Captain Kirk and Kumara Captain, part of our culture in a way we hope is entertaining to you all." He waggled his ears, and Kirk recognized the Briamosite version of a chuckle.

"If paraders seem they especially happy, is not because they are glad to see you necessarily. For purposes of parading, today was declared local metropolitan holiday so paraders could take off workings to participate. Are being compensated for not working."

Uhura-kirk nodded slightly. That was the correct response. Kirk was permitted the luxury of smiling, although it was with Lieutenant Sulu's face.

Every time the Briamosites hinted at their sense of humor, Kirk was elated. It was one area where the Klingons couldn't hope to compete, lacking much of any kind of humor other than the sadistic. However, he cautioned himself, the grin fading, it would be better not to count on the aliens reacting in any predictable fashion until the conference got underway and he had a chance to see how their hosts reacted to serious matters.

A great fanfare of brassy but bizarre music rolled across the grassy sward in front of the reviewing stand they stood on. It sounded like violins and organs competing with damp bagpipes. At a signal from Pliver, the visitors followed the Briamosite leaders out from under the concealing canopy. Kirk took in their surroundings.

The metal-and-wood reviewing stand was nothing extraordinary, a simple construction designed to be functional rather than impressive. Across the open green-blue field Kirk saw spires, lofty and attenuated like the Briamosites

themselves, rising from the distant resort town where the conference hall was located. A curving slice of deep azure, like a blue plate viewed almost edge-on, showed where the ocean of the northern hemisphere backed onto the town.

The fanfare became a rather dizzy march. Variously dressed ranks and clusters of well-organized Briamosites strode back and forth in front of the parade stand. Their long limbs swung supplely as they walked.

The four Briamosite leaders beamed approvingly as each new group appeared. Uhura, using Kirk's body, dutifully tried to mimic their appreciation. It wasn't easy. Nothing was spectacular about the parade, though the Briamosites appeared to feel otherwise.

After the parade had run for half an hour and there was still no end in sight to the flag-waving, uniformed ranks before them, the inflexible Klingons were beginning to twitch noticeably. Kirk knew that the sight of "inferior" beings passing in seemingly unending waves before them was enough to crack even Klingon self-control. One officer snapped at another who was crowding him too closely, and only a harsh, single word whispered by Kumara kept them from fighting on the stand.

The parade continued for another two hours. By then Kirk could almost feel sympathy for Kumara, who looked about ready to scream. When the last rank of marchers had faded across the plain, the final banner receded into the distance, Leader Sarvus turned to both visiting captains. He wore a blank expression but his ears fidgeted happily, the Briamosite version of a politician who has just surveyed his constituents and seen a healthy majority of favorable votes.

"Gentlesirs, what think you? You have just seen forty-five (untranslatable noun) representing all the continents of the several worlds of the United Systems of Briamos."

"Very impressive," Kumara lied quickly, always first to flatter.

"Very much so," said Spock-uhura, "I wish only we could see it over again."

The comment produced pleased fluttering from the ears of the four Briamosite officials. It engendered the exact opposite reaction from Kumara and his cohorts. The prospect of sitting

through a repeat of the just-endured parade was almost more than they could bear.

Nevertheless, it gave Kumara an opportunity to display his remarkably un-Klingonlike diplomacy. "We also would enjoy a repeat," he said with a perfectly straight face, "but too much pleasure in a single day dulls one's mind for more serious endeavors. Hopefully another day."

"No doubt you are right," an impressed Leader Sarvus admitted. "Until tomorrow, then, at the conference hall within the town, at the appointed time. You will transporter coordinates for the conference place be given."

One of the Klingons stepped forward to huddle with Colonel-Greeter Pliver. After a moment's hesitation, too brief to cause comment, Kirk-sulu moved to join them to record the coordinates.

"These will bring you down by the lakeshore, in the chamber itself within the building," Pliver told them after they had both noted the series of numbers that would tell their respective transporter computers where to set them down. "The structure itself is not an official one, but part of a large recreational complex, so your surroundings may a bit informal seem."

"We are looking forward," Leader Sarvus was saying to Kumara and Uhura-kirk, "to hearing the arguments and persuasions of both your governments." For a moment the supreme leader of the Briamosite peoples looked troubled. "Actually we do not seek an alliance so soon, but external considerations seem to be forcing us inexorably in that direction. I need hardly tell you both," he cautioned more firmly, looking at each captain in turn, "to present the strongest arguments you can muster. The Council of Greater Briamos will base its decision on the evidence you present to us in these coming few days. Once concluded, we of Briamos will abide permanently by that decision."

"All of us are looking forward to the first session," said Sulu-spock.

"Until tomorrow-time, then," murmured Uhura-kirk softly.

"Yes, until tomorrow." Kumara responded now to one of his officers, who called for him to move aside so they could be

transported up to their ship. Unable to resist a last stab, Kumara half smiled at Uhura-kirk. "We are in a hurry to return to our ship so that we may supervise maintenance procedures, Jim. That is a function treated with notorious sloppiness in the Federation, a characteristic of most Federation activities—as anyone can tell by looking at the *Enterprise*."

"Our damages would not have been incurred," Uhura-kirk responded loudly, for the benefit of attentive Briamosite officials as much as for Kumara's ears, "*despite* interference with navigational beacons, if we hadn't been so involved with the recent recovery of an interesting artifact. An artifact," she said, directing her words now to the Briamosite leader Sarvus, "which we will present for your edification and inspection during the conference, sir."

Kumara looked dubious and curious all at once. "What sort of artifact?" But Uhura-kirk didn't get the opportunity to reply.

The Leader was speaking. "We not really are interested in archeological matters right now, Captain Kirk. There are far more important matters to be dealt with."

"I believe you'll be interested in *this* artifact," Uhura-kirk insisted. "It is, in a way, part of our presentation. A means of showing you the thoroughness with which we of the United Federation explore our own worlds and those around us. The artifact will not take up much space, and will be an interesting diversion to all attending the conference." She noticed the Klingons staring at Kirk's body. "*You* should find it interesting also, Captain Kumara."

The Klingon commander looked interested in spite of his attempts to appear otherwise. What sort of trick did Kirk have up his braided sleeves this time? Why haul an old bottle or some such relic into as critically balanced a conference as this one?

Kirk-sulu noted the effect of Uhura's words on the Klingon captain, but didn't smile. They had already gotten something out of the Slaver stasis box, and without even having to display it. Kumara was worried about the mysterious artifact. Good! The more it troubled him, the less ordered his dangerously fertile mind would be, and the fewer opportunities for creating mischief of his own he would have.

"As you say, Jim," the Klingon finally finished lamely.

Kirk-sulu watched with his companions while the four Klingons dissolved, taking with them a Kumara so rattled that he had forgotten that by leaving now, Kirk would have the last word with their hosts.

True to her training, Uhura didn't waste the chance. "You must excuse our friends the Klingons," she said. "Anything new and alien to their own culture makes them uneasy."

There, that was a suitably neutral statement, but one loaded with overtones they would begin to work on the Briamosites' minds after this day was done.

They were ready to beam-up. Kirk almost pulled out his own communicator. Fortunately, Sulu-spock reacted fast and did the same a step ahead of him.

"Mr. Scott?" Sulu-spock said into his pickup.

"Yes . . . Mr. Spock." Scott's response was broken by an infinitesimal pause.

"You may beam us aboard," Sulu-spock informed the distant chief matter-of-factly. "I have new coordinates to program in for our beam-down tomorrow."

"Very good, Mr. Spock. Standing by."

"Tomorrow—with expectations of benign developments," Colonel-Greeter-Pliver told them with that odd little sideways bow of the Briamosites. His words and attitude were as warm as official neutrality permitted, but Kirk felt confident that the Greeter was on their side.

However, he reminded himself, it was not Pliver's vote that counted, but those of the three distinguished aliens conversing in low tones behind him.

XV

Somewhere elseness became the norm for a moment or two. Then they were greeted by the familiar surroundings of Transporter Room 3. A smiling chief engineer rushed around toward them from behind the transporter console as soon as the four had fully coalesced.

He went straight toward Kirk's body. "Captain?" His voice was hopeful, hesitant.

"Sorry, Scotty," Kirk had to say. Scott looked over at Sulu's shape, where the words had been generated. "I'm still in Mr. Sulu's body. All four of us are still switched around."

Scott fought hard not to look disappointed. "I tried a couple of little things, sir, with the console levels. As much as I could without risk of makin' things worse." He shrugged. "It was an unreasonable hope."

They stepped down out of the alcove, walked over toward the turbolift doors. Scott stopped to gaze longingly at the transporter.

"We're still workin' on the original damaged rectifier, Captain," he informed them. "I've also been workin' with the computer, on Mr. Sulu's suggestion that we use your original recorded patterns to beam you out and then back in—hopefully back in your proper bodies." He shook his head sadly. "I still don't think it'll work, Mr. Sulu." He directed his words to Spock's watching form, where the helmsman's mind was still housed. "But if the realigned rectifier should fail for some reason, then we'll have no choice but to try it anyway.

"Still, I'm afraid that if I send you all out and bring you back, and you're still not correctly reintegrated, you might never be able to get your own bodies back. Overlapping pattern fixation on the false patterns you're now using would prohibit ever reversin' the situation."

"We'll try it as a last resort only then, Scotty," Kirk-sulu agreed.

"I hope we dinna have to, Captain," the chief engineer told him. "You might all end up frozen in these bodies for the rest of your natural lives."

Spock-uhura glanced down at himself, at the body of the communications chief. "The prospect of remaining forever locked in this form is indeed appalling, Mr. Scott."

"I'm not thrilled about it either, Mr. Spock," Uhura-kirk told him firmly. "I'd like nothing better than to, to repossess my own body." Her hands gestured at herself. "The chemical balance of this male envelope initiates some of the most absurd reactions."

"We'll all be glad when,"—he was careful not to say "if"—"we're back where we belong, Lieutenant," Kirk assured her soothingly. "Keep us posted on progress with the rectifier, Scotty. Oh, how's the stasis box coming along? We'll probably take it down with us tomorrow."

Scott was glad of the chance to report some good news. "All ready for you, Captain. It's on the bridge. I couldn't put it in your cabin," he added a mite apologetically, "without forcin' the door seal, and I didn't want to do that."

"It's just as well, Scotty. There's nothing to hide from the crew, and I don't think I can get into my own cabin myself now. The voice and retinal patterns that the door lock would recognize belong to that body," and he pointed at Uhura, "not to Mr. Sulu's, where I'm presently residing. If I need to get into my own cabin, Lieutenant Uhura's going to have to come along."

The four officers took the turbolift to the bridge. Although everyone on board the *Enterprise* had by now been thoroughly apprised of the quadruple body switch—mind switch, rather—it still took personnel encountering it for the first time a few minutes to get used to addressing Captain Kirk as Uhura and Sulu as Captain Kirk, and so on.

As Scott had promised, the stasis box was waiting for them. It rested on a small stand next to the left arm of the command chair. Kirk-sulu walked over to it, and was joined by Spock-uhura. "It certainly looks real enough, Captain," the first officer said.

Kirk had to admit that it did. Using Spock's descriptions of the original box, the engineering department had inserted something into the box which produced an encapsulating blue aura. The top of the box had been resealed by some exotic weldfill technique, as much art as metallurgy, so that with his face only a centimeter away Kirk couldn't see where the box had been opened.

Reaching out, he picked it up, his hands feeling a faint tingle from the false stasis field. "*I'm* convinced, Spock. But will it fool the Klingons?"

"Even sensor equipment will produce information insisting that the aura," and Spock-uhura indicated the box, "is a genuine Slaver field. The Klingons will not be given an opportunity to inspect the box closely. Furthermore, Klingon has encountered only one stasis box in its entire history of stellar exploration, and that was several hundred years ago. They are not as familiar with the artifacts as we are and so are unlikely to know enough to expose the fraud."

With that, the first officer resumed his position at the science station. The ensign he replaced couldn't help staring as he moved aside. He knew Spock was taking over, but all he could see was Uhura.

This caused Kirk to look around the bridge. The captain was manning communications, and he, as Sulu, was seated in the command chair while Spock was serving as helmsman and Uhura was at the science station. That view of the bridge would be certain to set Kumara thinking. Instead, Kirk decided to give his Klingon counterpart something else to dwell on.

"Lieutenant Uhura."

"Yes, Captain," she replied in his own voice, from her position at communications.

"If you pick up any transmissions from Kumara's ship, or from the surface, acknowledge them but do so mechanically. Under no circumstances provide visual communication. And if the Briamosites or Kumara desire to speak to me, Lieutenant, you'll have to answer."

"I understand, sir," she replied. Kirk didn't think he could ever get used to conversing with himself.

So far everyone had performed admirably under impossible circumstances. Uhura had played Kirk reasonably well. It said something for the camaraderie that normally existed on board that they could imitate each other so efficiently. Kirk had to stay alert constantly, though, to make certain those imitations never degenerated into caricature.

They had succeeded in avoiding any serious psychological problems. Those might still lie ahead, he knew. Give the body's normal endocrine system long enough and it would begin to affect the minds housed in unfamiliar surroundings. The sooner the conference below could be concluded successfully, he knew, the better their chances would be. Meanwhile, they could only remain vigilant and hope Dr. McCoy's worries found no basis in fact.

Spock was walking back to his own cabin, musing on the intriguing but distressing events that had left him imprisoned in this cumbersome, awkward form. Thus far he'd been able to repress anything seriously upsetting. He could imitate—as long as nothing terribly drastic was required—human reactions. But he was still very much himself.

Before leaving for rest and recreation period, until they beamed-down tomorrow, all four of the officers had gone over their personal needs with that other mind inhabiting their natural bodies. All indication of amusement absent from her voice, Lieutenant Uhura had warned Spock above all not to forget taking the several monthly capsules her system required, which he would find in the dispensers in her cabin. Spock assured her he would not.

It was difficult enough to face the possibility that he might have to live the remainder of his life in this human body. He was not about to risk getting it pregnant. Not that, he had hastened to assure her, his own mind could in its wildest moments conceive of permitting that to happen. But she made him promise to take the supplement capsules nonetheless. Spock could have quarreled with her on personal grounds. But since the communications chief regarded the subject so emotionally, he decided to humor her.

He stopped. Someone was standing in his way. Spock moved to go around him. The man, a tall ensign from organic

fabrication whom Spock didn't recognize, moved to block his intended path.

"In a hurry?" the ensign, said, grinning in a moronic fashion not becoming to a member of Starfleet forces. He leaned on one hand against the corridor wall.

"If you will kindly let me pass," Spock said with a touch of irritation.

"Hey, now!" The man shifted to block Spock's new attempt to walk around him. "I know you're a superior officer and all, but I didn't think you'd already forget about . . ."

It suddenly occurred to Spock that possibly all the crew, certainly not all those on long sleep cycles, had learned of the transformation of the four officers into different bodies. This ensign's familiar attitude toward a superior officer was decidedly unbecoming, but that was a matter between him and Lieutenant Uhura, a matter in which Spock had no particular desire to interfere.

Fighting the peculiar hormone reaction all at once surging through the body he inhabited—a fight which required the most vigorous application of mental discipline—he tried to explain. "I am not Lieutenant Uhura, Ensign."

The man stared at Uhura's face, heard Uhura's voice. His initial bravado turned to confusion, puzzlement. When he spoke he sounded a little hurt.

"Now, what's this all about?" the ensign broke into a wide grin. "You didn't always used to stand on rank."

Spock rushed on, hoping to spare this unfortunate individual any further embarrassment. "There was a transporter semifailure. It resulted in the transfer of the minds of your captain, your executive officer, and Lieutenants Sulu and Uhura into the wrong bodies upon reintegration. That is the present disturbing state of affairs. They will remain this way until Engineer Scott can trace and correct the trouble with the damaged transporter."

"Oh, come on, Uhura! What are you feeding me? You're Uhura . . . Lieutenant," he added, a touch accusingly. "Tell me I don't know how to recognize—"

"I happen to be Commander Spock," Uhura's voice informed the ensign frostily. "Presently I am inhabiting Lieutenant

Uhura's body. Lieutenant Uhura's mind is located in the body of Captain Kirk. If you will take the time to contact the bridge, or any of your fellow shipmates who doubtless heard the announcement while you did not, you will find that what I am telling you is the truth."

The ensign's face ran through a remarkable gamut of expressions in a short time. "You're joking with me, aren't you? This is some kind of game you're playing." The man didn't sound as positive as before. "Look, if it was something I said—"

"There's an intercom." Spock-uhura indicated the grid-and-panel set into the corridor wall. "Contact whomever you wish and check what I say."

"All right. All right, I will," the ensign responded, with the air of one about to call a bluff. "We'll call this joke off fast." He thumbed the intercom.

"Excuse me, is Yeoman Anderson there?" A pause, during which the ensign smiled faintly and Spock-uhura stood quietly waiting. "Yes, Anderson? This is Ensign Kearly. Hey, did something go wrong with one of the transporters recently? I heard this hysterical story that the captain, Mr. Spock and—"

A strong female voice at the other end spoke from the grid. "Yes. Don't you know about it, Kearly? Damnedest thing . . . I guess you must have been deep in sleep cycle. Seems that in trying to beam down to Briamos there was some kind of problem with the transporter. Rumor up from Engineering says that it was caused by that pulsar wave we ran through a while ago." The ensign's face, as he listened to this, was drawn.

"Anyway, it seems like everyone trying to beam down got all shifted around, wrong mind in the wrong body. It's hard to believe, I know, but I've personally—"

"Never mind, Yeoman." Ensign Kearly sounded a bit shaky. "I just wanted to confirm it." He clicked off, turned to stare at Uhura's form. He looked, and sounded, as if he were confronting a ghost. "Then . . . you really *are* Commander Spock?"

The first officer replied as gently as he could. Still, he was unable to keep all the irritation out of his voice. "Believe me, Ensign Kearly, this present situation is not more palatable to

me than to you, or to anyone else—least of all Lieutenant Uhura."

"Yes, ma'am—I mean, sir." The ensign executed a hurried, harried salute, excused himself, and moved rapidly away. Spock was allowed to continue on uninterrupted, with ample time to consider the peculiarities of human interrelationships.

Spock's comment to the ensign about the unpalatability of the present arrangement was an understatement as far as Uhura was concerned. Presently, the communications chief was resting in her own cabin. A technician with special clearance had had to open it manually for her, since Kirk's face and hands wouldn't key the door seal any more than his tenor would substitute for her higher, more delicate voice.

Although the captain's body she was imprisoned in was in excellent condition, compared to her own she found it awkward, clumsy, and oddly unmobile. Funny, she thought, leaning back on her bed, how one could grow so accustomed to something like a body. After all, what was it but an envelope of flesh to provide mobility for the mind?

Experimenting in the privacy of her cabin, she tried to sing a favorite song, the one she had composed for her grandfather back on Earth. In place of her beautiful, throaty tones the room filled with an excruciatingly harsh, unmelodic gargling noise. It might have passed as a cry for help, but certainly not for music. She sat up in amazement that so grating a sound could issue from her throat.

There were any number of other things about her present body that made her feel uncomfortable. The best thing she could do would be to ignore them and try to relax. She lay back down again. The sooner she had her own body back, the better. The thought of spending the rest of her life in this lumbering masculine shape appalled her at least as much as did the prospect of spending the rest of his life in her body did Mr. Spock.

By the following morning, Engineer Scott could only report that the sensitive work on the damaged rectifier was proceeding as fast as he dared permit.

Kirk-sulu carried the stasis box in a large, unadorned container as the four prepared to beam down for the second day of conference, and the first real negotiating session. To hide their deception, the container had been made large enough to hold both the box and the false field it was generating, since a true Slaver stasis field would have appeared outside the walls of a smaller container.

A familiar but never comfortable instant of not-being, and the four officers found themselves in a modest but impressive domed chamber large enough to hold a hundred people easily. The floor was composed of slabs of irregularly cut stone resembling gold-veined marble. The entire wall on their left was made of long slim panes of some transparent glassy material. Kirk noted that it appeared to lighten and darken to match the changing sunlight pouring into the chamber. There were probably occasional clouds outside today, he thought.

They walked toward the window-wall and he saw that the chamber and the building they were in were set on a hill overlooking a broad swatch of ocean and beach. Towering sandstone cliffs streaked with horizontal bands of brown, orange, and maroon lined an imposing headland in the distance. Small craft of unusual design and construction swarmed like insects within the quiet water of the bay.

Kirk recalled what Colonel-Greeter Pliver had told them about this being a very popular resort area, within reach of the capital city. Trying to imagine himself one of the happy, thin aliens cavorting in sand and water below, he wondered how many of the local honeymooners—assuming Briamosites had honeymoons—partygoers, or ordinary vacationers realized that an interstellar conference was taking place only a couple of kilometers away from them. Or if they cared.

Come to think of it, if a similar work-halting conference were being held on Earth, the average citizen would shrug and wonder if he might squeeze out another day of vacation without offending his boss. After all, the future of the universal civilization was a trifle compared to the travails and adventures of everyday life. Fortunately, Kirk knew, there were those who took the business of civilization somewhat more seriously. They became philosophers or artists.

Or they joined Starfleet.

A long *U*-shaped table was set up near the window-wall, just out of reach of the invading sunlight. The rest of the chamber was empty of furniture, giving it a spaciousness one usually felt in far larger halls. The two prongs of the *U* faced into the room while the curve backed against the window-wall.

Leader Sarvus and Vice-Leader Chellea sat at the apex of the *U*-curve. They were flanked by Colonel-Greeter Pliver, who now rose as the Federation representatives approached, and several other undoubtedly important members of the Briamosite hierarchy whose faces were new to Kirk. One of them sat particularly stiffly. His clothing and manner marked him as a military man. Empty seats, four to a side, lined the outside of both horns of the table.

"Greetings, Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, and Lieutenants," said Pliver, walking around the table to shake hands human-fashion with each of them. He conducted them to their chairs on the near side of the *U*. The seats were a bit tight and narrow for the human pelvis, but the four officers managed—though Spock, in Uhura's body, had a difficult moment.

Pliver glanced curiously at the large box Kirk was carrying. "What does the lieutenant carry, Captain?" he asked, talking to Kirk's body. "The artifact?"

"Yes," replied Uhura-kirk. "We'll unveil it later." As Pliver seemed satisfied with that and didn't press for details, Uhura wisely kept quiet

Kumara and his attending officers arrived a few moments later. They took the four seats on the horn of the table opposite their Federation counterparts.

The Briamosites promptly opened the conference by reasserting their humanlike characteristics. Every official present, lips firm and ears wagging like flowers in a strong breeze, delivered a substantial speech, including Sarvus and Chellea. No one intended that his part in this important occasion should fail to be entered into Briamosite history. In addition to a sense of humor, it was clear the inhabitants of Briamos were developed politically. So Kirk, Kumara, and the other guests listened while the officials of Briamos detailed variously the importance of the conference: what they hoped might be achieved by it, their desire to maintain friendly

relations with both governments no matter which one they eventually entered into alliance with . . .

The self-important speeches, Kirk knew, were a characteristic common to immature races. Even the member races of the Federation hadn't entirely outgrown the juvenile aspects of government.

"I now declare open this conference," Sarvus declaimed at last. "We of Briamos look forward to hearing from each of you at length." Kirk tensed. The time had come for formal presentations, and serious business.

It was the signal for the opposing executive officers, in this case Sulu in Spock's body, to rise in turn and deliver long prepared presentations. For Sulu-spock, the words had been constructed by the best Federation psychopoliticos at Starfleet Command and then relayed out to Starbase 25. Sulu-spock read the sentences mechanically, spelling out as clearly and persuasively as possible the advantages which would accrue to Briamos if they aligned themselves with the Federation.

Kirk knew the speech would have been more impressive and had greater impact if it had been delivered half extemporaneously by Spock himself, since Spock had the words fully memorized. But that wasn't possible. Kirk noticed that Spock, in Uhura's body, was following Sulu's recitation closely.

The Briamosites didn't appear offended by Sulu-spock's reading of the prepared statement. As Kirk had hoped, they seemed more interested in content than form. All Sulu had to do was maintain a posture of Vulcan detachment, keep his voice a monotone. That was easy enough. The only problem in rehearsing the speech back aboard ship had been to restrain Sulu during the more emotion-charged sections of the speech. After much practice he had been able to recite the words without overly emphasizing any of them. Just as he was doing now.

If anything, it was even flatter in tone than Spock would have presented it. They had decided to err on the side of reality rather than risk having Sulu reveal anything by trying to drive a particular point home.

From Leader Sarvus and Vice-Leader Chellea down to the lowest-ranking official present (a representative from one of

the outlying Briamosite worlds), the assembled alien officials received the address quietly. Occasionally they would nod or jerk their heads in meaningful but indecipherable fashion, or lean over to whisper briefly to some colleague. They did not interrupt, with either applause or boos, or with questions or comments.

When Sulu-spock concluded the speech and sat down, Chellea responded with a short paragraph of thanks, then asked Kumara to present his side. The Klingons' executive officer acknowledged his captain's nod, rose, and loudly proclaimed the Klingons' hopes and intentions.

Kirk bristled at some of the claims and outright falsehoods contained in the speech, but restrained himself. First of all, it wasn't Lieutenant Sulu's place—the body he occupied—to raise objections unless his comments were specifically requested. Secondly, Kirk knew that they would have ample time later to counter the Klingon arguments and make objections of their own.

Looking smug and satisfied, Kumara's first officer concluded his speech in a burst of fiery rhetoric accusing the Federation of intending everything for Briamos from child-stealing to slavery, and resumed his seat. His smile shrank considerably when, much to the surprise of both parties, the Briamosite officials removed tiny devices from beneath their portion of the table. On touching controls, each instrument regurgitated long scroll-like strips of plastic opacity imprinted with dots and dashes and curlicues. Both Kirk and Kumara expected that their words would be somehow preserved, but they hadn't expected each official to make his or her own personal record. It displayed a thoroughness Kirk had not given the Briamosites credit for. He should have.

After thoughtful inspection of their individual scrolls, the officials looked up at their visitors. And the questions began. They favored neither side. The assembled Briamosites fired questions rapidly, almost impatiently, at the respective speechmakers.

Both Kumara's executive officer and Sulu-spock responded as best as they could. Once, another Klingon officer replied to a question from Vice-Leader Chellea when the executive officer seemed at a loss for words. That was what Kirk had

been hoping for. When the Briamosites offered no objection to the new speaker, it meant that he, in Sulu's body, and Spock, in Uhura's, could now offer their own expertise during the questioning.

So as the questioning continued relentlessly, when "Spock" or "Kirk" appeared slow to respond or unsure of certain answers, Kirk felt this was more than made up for by the impressive speed with which the two subofficers, Lieutenants Sulu and Uhura, answered the queries. Indeed, even the Klingons appeared impressed by the literate, thorough responses the two Federation lieutenants provided in response to certain difficult questions posed.

Once, a particularly unsubtle inquiry was made by one of the Briamosite officials in regard to the depth and preparedness of the Federation's armed forces, in reference to something the Klingon executive officer had mentioned in his speech. Everyone was surprised when communications officer Lieutenant Uhura responded. They were more than surprised, they were astonished at the lengthy list of impressive figures, details, and placements—all unclassified—which were provided, seemingly with effortless recall.

Kumara in particular eyed Uhura curiously, wondering at the apparently unrehearsed expertise she had demonstrated in a matter not related to communications.

"Isn't it a fact, Lieutenant," Kumara said quickly, when Spock-uhura had finished reeling off the stunning array of statistics, "that the starship grouping monitoring Starbase Fourteen was removed only two months ago because that section and the races in it weren't thought worth protecting by Federation officials?"

Kirk watched Spock-uhura closely without trying to betray his concern. Kumara had concocted a tricky question. It was true, as the Klingon had claimed, that Starfleet forces had been withdrawn from that sector recently. But that had nothing to do with not wanting to extend protection to federated peoples in that area. However, it did show the extent and efficiency of Klingon intelligence.

Actually, the ships had been transferred to airdock for normal maintenance and overhauling and were scheduled to return to their positions in another two months. But it looked,

if one viewed the matter as Kumara did, as if the Federation was guilty of indifference to the people of Sector 14, or at least of gross negligence. Kumara could argue that the reappearance of Starfleet vessels in that sector now would be a Federation attempt to cover their error and curry favor with the Briamosites.

Sometimes, however, when the best-laid plans of mice and men went awry, they could lead to equally efficacious new plans. Such was the case now, as Spock turned a physical disadvantage into an advantage. "I cannot answer you, Captain Kumara," Spock-uhura claimed. "A communications officer is not privy to such detailed information about military maneuvers. Since it doesn't pertain to my specialty, I can't confirm or deny your report. Ship movements are more in the province of navigation."

Kirk promptly picked up his cue. "I'll be glad to check on unclassified movements in Sector Fourteen and report back to this assembly," Kirk-sulu declared. "I do know that ships are often called from duty for standard maintenance." He looked at his own body. "Isn't that true, Captain?"

"I am not permitted to confirm information of such a sensitive military nature," Uhura-kirk replied, fast enough to earn an order of merit.

There! Those multiple responses countered Kumara's accusation while leaving the facts sufficiently ambiguous to forestall the need of a specific reply.

Kumara accepted his semantic defeat with good grace. It was only one of dozens of similar verbal battles that would be contested across the conference table before the day's session drew to an exhausted end.

The session went on into the early Briamosite evening, which was later in arriving than that of a normal twenty-four-hour human day. The setting sun of Briamos was turning the sandstone parapets across the bay to ribbons of grainy flame, and lights were winking on on the pleasure craft circling beneath them, by the time the questioning finally came to an end.

Uhura-kirk rose. "If there are no more questions from our hosts—"

Kirk-sulu broke in hurriedly, "One more item on today's agenda . . . Captain."

Uhura-kirk recovered quickly. "I was about to bring it up, Lieutenant." She remained standing, gestured toward him. "The presentation and display."

Kirk-sulu felt relief he didn't show. Standing and picking up the crate they had brought from the ship, he moved between the table horns.

"A stand or small pedestal of some sort will be helpful, sirs," he told the Council, directing his voice toward Pliver.

The Colonel-Greeter wagged his left ear, touched a switch set into the table before him. A section of seamless wall slid aside, revealing a pair of huge, armed Briamosite soldiers. The Colonel-Greeter barked instructions at them. They vanished into the wall, reappeared moments later with a single-stemmed pedestal-table.

Kirk wasn't surprised by the presence of the armed troops. Such grim visages were present to insure that in the event the conference didn't continue in an atmosphere of sweetness and light, the Briamosite hosts would be protected from Klingon-Federation belligerence. Automatic weaponry would have been more efficient, but the presence of live troops would be effective enough, he knew.

"You can show it at any time, Lieutenant Sulu," Uhura-kirk told him.

"Yes, sir."

Picking up the container, he placed it on the pedestal and began unsnapping the side and top panels. When the last latch had been flipped, he touched a switch in the base of the container. Dramatically, the top and all four sides fell away simultaneously, revealing the glowing stasis box.

Expressions of amazement filled the chamber. They came not from the phlegmatic Briamosites, but from Kumara and his officers.

"What is this artifact you have brought to show us?" Leader Sarvus inquired, eyeing the box intently.

Kirk-sulu went on to explain about the ancient, extinct civilization of the Slavers and the isolated relics of their culture, the stasis boxes, which were occasionally discovered

in scattered parts of the galaxy. As the story continued, several of the Briamosite officials wagged their ears in recognition and appeared more and more impressed. That meant that the wonders of the stasis boxes were at least known to the people of Briamos.

"As you can see," Kirk concluded, gesturing with Sulu's hand at the softly glowing cube of Slaver metal, "this stasis box has not yet been opened. It could contain an ultimate weapon, any kind of valuable device, or nothing at all. But to show you our good faith and our confidence in the people of Briamos, we've brought it here for you to see."

"Even though," Uhura-kirk added meaningfully, "we knew there would be Klingons present."

"It's a fake!" Kumara rose angrily, trying to divide his attention between Kirk-sulu, the box, and Leader Sarvus. "They wouldn't dare bring a real, unopened stasis box here to display on an unallied world. Especially," he added with a loaded grin of his own, "knowing that there would be representatives of Klingon present."

When neither Sulu-spock, Spock-uhura, or Uhura-kirk elected to respond to Kumara's accusation, Kirk decided to risk appearing a bit authoritative.

"If one of your officers has at his waist a standard-issue imperial science 'corder, you can see for yourselves."

Kumara stared curiously at Sulu's form for a moment, then shrugged, his mind too busy with more important matters to follow up the impossible suspicion that had briefly occurred to him. He eyed one of his subordinates. "Kaldin. Let him use yours." He looked at Sulu. "I assume you'd prefer to run the analysis yourself, Lieutenant, rather than let one of my men near your precious 'stasis' box?"

Kirk-sulu nodded, walked over to the Klingons, and took the compact instrument from the glaring officer who proffered it. Carefully he passed the device over the box, making certain the setting on the instrument was not set too deep, where it could pick up traces of the metal within, modern metals which Scott had used in constructing the Slaver-field falsifier. He also avoided the edges around the top of the box, where Scott had resealed it.

Then he turned and handed it back to the Klingon officer, walked back to stand next to the pedestal, and waited. There *was* a chance he might have mispassed the 'corder, that it might have detected a hint of the chief engineer's handiwork.

Apparently he hadn't. The Klingon officer read the readouts on the device, performed a few hasty calculations with a separate instrument, conferred with the other subofficer on his left, and turned a grim, solemn gaze on his captain.

"Sir, the box is Slaver metal."

"You're certain of that, Kaldin?" Kumara asked tensely.

"There can be no mistake with these readings, Captain," Kaldin insisted, gesturing with the 'corder. He extended the hand holding the device. "Slaver metal cannot be faked. Even if it could, the metal readings translate according to their nuclear bonds as being over a billion years old, and that *certainly* cannot be faked. To last until now, any metal would have to have been encased in a Slaver stasis field. Check the readouts for yourself, sir."

Kumara wrenched the small instrument away from the officer, glanced briefly at the readings and handed it back. When he looked up at Kirk-sulu again his expression was more speculative than anything else. "Very well. So you do dare. But how can I be certain that it is a real unopened stasis box? Simply because it's Slaver metal is not proof enough."

The conversation was beginning to revolve around Kumara and Kirk-sulu, a dangerous development. Uhura-kirk recognized the danger, spoke quickly to the captain. "Mr. Sulu, Captain Kumara is doubtful that we're telling the truth. Why don't we produce some facts he can't argue with. Let's open the box for all to see—right here, right now."

"Yes, sir," Kirk-sulu acknowledged. Turning, he took a small cutter from his waist and extended it into the field. Evidentally he was going to use the thumb-sized flamer on the box's upper rim.

The reaction was uncertainty among the Briamosites. Among the Klingons, who were familiar with stasis boxes and their properties, the reaction was much more predictable. They were on their feet, staring in disbelief, except for one officer who was hunting frantically for a place to hide.

All of Kumara's usual poise temporarily deserted him. He was waving both hands wildly, his gaze switching nervously from Uhura-kirk to the ready Kirk-sulu. "Wait . . .! Jim, have you gone mad?"

Kirk-sulu activated the miniature cutter and moved the high-intensity, dark blue flame closer to the metal of the box.

Desperately Kumara whirled to face Leader Sarvus. "Sir, I beseech you, stop this! The humans have gone crazy. You can't just open a Slaver stasis box with some crude tool. It could set off a disruptor bomb or some other ingenious Slaver trap within the box. A special device is required to open the box safely." He turned disbelieving eyes back to Kirk-sulu and the threatening little flame. "We could all be killed!"

"You want proof, we're going to give it to you," said Uhura-kirk indifferently. "Existence is a game of chances. We're not afraid."

"Just the same, Captain Kirk," urged Leader Sarvus, a mite shakily, "we would prefer that if there is any truth in what Captain Kumara says, you do not demonstrate your courage so recklessly. There is no need." He indicated the box with a long, graceful arm. "*I* believe you."

"As you wish, sir." Uhura-kirk looked toward the box. "Never mind, Lieutenant Sulu."

"Yes, sir." Kirk-sulu flicked off the cutter, replaced it at his waist. He fought to keep from grinning at the look of relief that appeared on Kumara's face. Well, he could hardly blame him. If their positions had been reversed, he doubted he would have been crazy enough to try and call the box bluff.

"It is true, honored leader," Uhura-kirk was telling Sarvus, "that a Slaver stasis box must be opened carefully. But there is no need to be concerned when the openers have confidence in their abilities. A stasis box is nothing more than a simple technological toy. Its age doesn't imbue it with any mystic properties. It's all a matter of basic physics." She glanced back at Kirk-sulu. "Isn't that right, Lieutenant?"

Kirk-sulu nodded, then reached out and gave the stasis box an impressive little shove. The box and aura fell to the hard, polished floor. This was a calculated risk, designed to demonstrate beyond argument for the benefit of the

Briamosites how courageous and self-assured the representatives of the Federation were.

Of course, if Scott's aura-simulator should break loose inside the metal container, and the aura vanish without any other sign of disruption, Kumara and his colleagues could turn from frightened to threatening. But Kirk was worrying needlessly. Mindful of the captain's pre-set plans, the ship's chief engineer had secured the box's fake components tightly. The box bounced, but its blue halo continued to glow steadily.

The two Klingon subofficers yelped despairingly and dove behind their seats. Kumara's executive officer winced visibly, but held his position. Kumara did likewise, but his hands tightened on the edge of the table.

Kirk-sulu approached the box. He gave it a short kick. It went bumping and bouncing toward the Federation side of the table, while a couple of Klingon officers orchestrated each bounce and tumble with appropriate moans.

"I do wish," Kumara finally felt compelled to request, "that you wouldn't let him do that, Jim."

"All right." Uhura-kirk smiled. "I think we've amply demonstrated relative values of, well, not courage, but confidence."

"Insanity, you mean," Kumara whispered by way of reply, his eyes still fixed to the box.

"Lieutenant?"

Kirk-sulu picked up the stasis box, placed it on the table in front of his chair, and sat down.

Glowering furiously but helpless to do anything, the Klingon officers resumed their seats.

Leader Sarvus rose, placed both hands and long, limber fingers on the table before him as he regarded Kirk and Kumara. "The Council will retire for private discussion of today's session, gentlebeings. We must debate among ourselves all that has been told and . . . shown to us. Everything will be considered. If you desire them, refreshments will be brought to you. Since we may require additional information or elaboration of material already put to us, we request that you do not leave until we formally adjourn this meeting."

"That's fine with us," said Uhura-kirk pleasantly, after a rapid and unnoticed glance over at Kirk-sulu, who nodded confirmation of the Leader's request.

"And to us," rumbled Kumara, still eyeing the stasis box as if he expected it to leap across the open space between them and blow up in his face.

"We will return in," and the leader named a figure that corresponded to about two Federation hours. If Kirk's suspicions regarding Briamosite politics were even partly correct, the figure Sarvus mentioned was decidedly optimistic. He didn't expect the Briamosite council to conclude their deliberations in double the indicated time.

Not that that bothered him. He was prepared to wait. Events had proceeded well for the Federation. A glance at Spock-uhura showed that his first officer was also optimistic about the outcome of the conference.

There was a rustling of soft-legged chairs as the various Briamosite officials slid away from the conference table. A panel in the curving wall slid aside and the officials disappeared into an unsuspected chamber. That left the four Klingons and four Federation officers seated quietly facing each other.

Kumara had turned and was huddled with his subordinates. They conversed in whispers. Kirk and his companions did likewise, glad of the opportunity to drop their mimicry for even a few minutes.

"Captain, I've never been so terrified in my whole life," Uhura confessed in Kirk's own voice. "I never used to know what stage fright was. Now I do."

"You were terrific, Uhura," Kirk assured her. "And you, Mr. Sulu. You make a very convincing Vulcan."

"Thank you, sir. I had an excellent instructor."

"I must add my own congratulations, Lieutenant," said Spock in Uhura's mellifluous tones. "You've imitated me quite convincingly. I must say it is a strange sensation to attend a conference and watch while one's own self replies to arguments, answers questions, and moves about independent of one's own thoughts. It is very much like a dream."

Kirk's estimate of Briamosite decision-making ability was correct. At least four hours had passed before the assembled knot of gangly aliens filed back into the conference chamber and resumed their seats. They looked exhausted, mentally worn, but satisfied. Clearly they had reached agreement on one or more points.

Leader Sarvus alone did not sit down. Instead, he made a complex gesture with both hands, his amazingly flexible hearing organs dancing like the sails of toy boats in a spring breeze. "The Council of Briamos has decided."

Kirk leaned forward in surprise. So did Kumara. Neither captain had expected a final dispensation this quickly.

Sarvus noticed their heightened attentiveness, smiled with his ears. "We of Briamos do not do things in haste, but we like to do them without of time being wasteful. We do not feel further information is warranted or necessary. Enough has been presented, combined with what we already have learned, for a lasting decision to be handed down.

"Toward the unsuccessful side, we wish no animosity." Kirk tensed in spite of himself. "We wish to remain friends with all. But it has been determined that it is in the best interests of the United Systems of Briamos to ally itself with the United Federation of Planets."

Kirk began to smile broadly. He glanced to his right—and what he saw killed the smile instantly. Fortunately, the Klingons were so outraged and excited at the Briamosites' announcement that they didn't notice Spock was also smiling. If they had noticed that inexplicable anomaly . . .

"Ssst! Mr. Sulu!"

Sulu-spock looked down at the insistent whisper, the smile fading curiously. Kirk grinned back, hugely, grotesquely, and pointed casually to the "science officer's" mouth. Sulu-spock looked blank for a moment, then shocked, as he realized what had happened. The smile vanished instantly from his face and he resumed the dour expression more suited to a Vulcan executive officer.

Kirk returned his attention to the rest of the chamber. No one had seen the unnatural smile. Certainly none of the

Klingons had, or they wouldn't be raving with such single-mindedness at their Briamosite hosts.

"Sorry I am," Leader Sarvus declared in a firm, no-nonsense voice. "But Council its decision has made. We have all the factors considered and balanced in objective fashion. We see no reason to change that decision. Nor can you present any additional evidence which would lead us to do so." He paused to let the Klingons absorb that. "Until tomorrow when we will an official leave-taking have for both sides, is suggested strongly we—"

"I have some suggestions of my own," a furious Kumara broke in. He was wholly Klingon now, his veneer of carefully cultivated gentility obliterated by the brusque finality of the Briamosite decision. "Since you have chosen to display the irrational obstinacy of so many of the more primitive races, you leave me no choice now but to—!"

Kirk had his communicator out and was in the process of activating it. He was too late. Kumara had come to the conference prepared to deal with any eventuality, including the Briamosites' announced decision. The Klingon did not bother with a communicator, with orders or directions, but simply touched a switch at his waist.

A vast humming filled the chamber, the heartbeat of a huge yellow glow that enveloped various sections of the room. Members of the Briamosite council scattered in confused panic. At their cries, wall panels slid aside and armed, alert Briamosite guards rushed into the chamber. But there was nothing for them to do, no one for them to arrest, no antagonists for them to subdue.

The Klingons, the four Federation representatives, and Leader Sarvus of the United Systems of Briamos had vanished with the glow.

Kirk realized what was happening before they re-materialized on board the Klingon cruiser. So incensed was he at Kumara's action that he nearly spoke out of turn—and out of character. Luckily, his companions were as furious as he was.

Sulu, carefully maintaining his Vulcan pose, spoke first as waiting Klingon guards herded the prisoners out of the

transporter alcove. His angry but controlled comments reminded the others that they were still imprisoned in the bodies of their friends and shipmates. "This is a direct violation of the Federation-Klingon treaty," Sulu-spock declaimed. "Such an action is tantamount to a declaration of war."

"I would hardly go that far," countered Kumara thoughtfully. There was no humor in his words, but he seemed less apoplectic now that he was safely aboard his own ship and once more in control of events.

The prisoners were escorted down a corridor and into an elevator shaft. "The Federation-Imperial treaties have power only within Federation-Imperial space," Kumara declared pleasantly. Kirk badly wanted to respond to that statement, but forced himself not to. It wasn't his place.

Uhura-kirk had to speak for him. "The systems of Briamos lie within the areas covered by treaty."

"That's so," conceded Kumara as the elevator moved. "However, within an inhabited, intelligence-dominated, technologically advanced system such as Briamos, the treaties have no force. Briamosite independence takes precedence over outside agreements. If we were acting outside the region claimed by Briamos, then all treaties would be in effect. Within their system, Briamosite jurisdiction has precedence," he added smugly. "We're prepared to argue the point with the Briamosites, not the Federation."

"You're basing this kidnapping on a legal technicality," Spock-uhura risked adding. "Submitting your specious argument to jurisprudence will reveal holes in it large enough to drive a starship through, Captain Kumara."

Kumara eyed Uhura's form curiously. "You dabble in interstellar law in addition to handling communications, Lieutenant?"

"A hobby only," replied Spock-uhura, promptly shutting up. It was exceedingly painful, but Spock was going to have to force himself not to reply to the Klingon commander's continued perversions of logic. Lieutenant Uhura wasn't supposed to know about interstellar law.

"Don't talk to me of technicalities," Kumara countered.

"Technicalities!" Uhura-kirk exclaimed in disblief. "You call the abduction by force from a treaty conference of your counterparts a technicality? Not to mention the kidnapping of the leader of an independent system."

"By force?" Kumara's lips curled in a Klingon grin. "No one has touched anyone. As for the other, we'll argue about it later. I have no more time to waste on subtleties."

That casual comment was far more chilling than any direct threat could have been.

The elevator doors slid aside and they were ushered onto the bridge of Kumara's ship. Several Klingon officers looked back briefly from their respective stations. One called out urgently, "Honored Captain, the Briamosite security vessels are converging on your position."

"They have received word then that we've invited their Leader to be our guest," Kumara murmured.

A curt alien sound, midway between a cough and a grunt, came from the vicinity of the Briamosite leader. Translation was not necessary. Its meaning was abundantly clear.

Kumara made a gesture and two of the Klingon soldiers prodded the tall leader. He moved forward reluctantly. Kirk watched, thinking frantically, cradling the stasis box under one arm. It had been beamed aboard with him, and there was nothing more he could do beyond grabbing it before some Klingon plucked it from its resting place in the transporter alcove. He wondered how much longer it would be before Kumara's attention switched from the viewscreen forward and the closing Briamosite ships, to the softly pulsing box Kirk held tightly next to his left side.

"Give me an open channel," the Klingon commander instructed his communications operator, "to the Briamosite ships."

A few adjustments to his instrumentation and the Klingon nodded to his captain. Kumara indicated that the Briamosite leader was to come forward, where he would be within range of the bridge visual pickup. When the leader refused, he was "assisted." Not especially gently, Kirk noted tight-lipped.

"They're your ships," Kumara said, indicating the converging shapes on the main viewscreen. "Tell them that you're in good

health and that as long as they keep their weapons quieted you will not be harmed."

"Why to my people should I lie?" The Leader stared over Kumara's head, entwined his flexible fingers in resignation.

"If you insist on playing the martyr, then naturally I can't stop you," said Kumara shrewdly. "You can always be one later. I think we can resolve our present situation, if you don't find our hospitality pleasing. So let's discuss before we come to any final, fatal decisions, shall we?" He indicated the viewscreen again.

"They can attack any time. Why rush your death?"

Leader Sarvus looked uncertain. He glanced back at Kirk-uhura for advice.

Uhura grew frantic, tried to look at Kirk-sulu without looking at him. But they had several simple, prearranged signals for communicating in emergencies without giving their altered identities away. One tap on the floor would indicate a negative, two taps positive. Kirk-sulu's boot stamped twice, nervously it seemed to any onlooker, and Uhura hurried her reply.

"Go ahead and tell your ships to hold back, sir. Let's see what Kumara has in mind, first."

The Leader's, ears twitched sharply. "It shall be as you say, Captain Kirk." He turned back toward the screen, his gaze passing over and utterly ignoring Kumara. "As we have little experience in dealing with the things of Klingon, we must rely on the advice of those who know them better."

Leaning forward over the pickup, he gave the order not to attack. There was a wait. A report came from the Klingon science station.

"Scanners show that all alien vessels continue to maintain their positions, Honored Captain."

Kumara looked up warningly at Sarvus. "Tell them to pull back. They can keep us within range if they like, but they're close enough to make me nervous."

The Briamosite leader spoke into the pickup once more. Then the viewscreen showed the warships, now numbering an impressive dozen, moving away from the Klingon cruiser.

Kumara appeared satisfied, and turned his attention to Uhura-kirk. "Now it's your turn, Jim. You'd better talk to your own people. As soon as they discover you're not down on the surface, and learn what happened, they're liable to panic instead of reacting sensibly."

"That'd be hard on you, wouldn't it?" a bitter Kirk-sulu said. Kumara ignored the lieutenant.

"Any attack would of course result in your death, Jim, and that of your companions. Needlessly, as you'll soon see. Either that or we'd destroy the *Enterprise*. Neither possibility can be to your liking." He barked an order at the communications officer, who promptly switched to standard Starfleet intership frequency.

Kirk-sulu's foot struck the deck twice again. Uhura-kirk didn't even look in his direction this time as she absorbed the instruction. "*Enterprise*?" she said into the aural pickup.

"Scott here. Is that you, Captain?" The chief engineer's worried voice gave no sign that he knew he was speaking to Lieutenant Uhura and not Kirk himself.

"Yes, Mr. Scott. We have been kidnapped by the Klingons."

Scott started to reply, sputtering, but Uhura-kirk cut him off quickly. "Remain calm, Mr. Scott." (How fortunate, Kirk mused, that Kumara wasn't aware Kirk commonly called his chief engineer Scotty.) "We have not been harmed. So far, it seems we are not going to be. We are going to . . . discuss the situation soon.

"Leader Sarvus of the United Systems of Briamos has been abducted with us." She added, for good measure and for Kumara's edification, "If it was only myself involved I'd have you arm all weapons and engage, Mr. Scott. However," and she looked back at Sarvus, "with the Leader of our new allies on board, we cannot risk a confrontation."

Kirk mentally wrote out a commendation for Uhura, She had managed to confirm officially that the Briamosites had now formally joined themselves to the Federation.

"Are you certain, Captain?" Scott inquired, emphasizing the "Captain."

"Mr. Scott," Uhura-kirk replied, "Mr. Spock, Lieutenant Sulu, and Lieutenant Uhura are all here with me. If any of them

could speak, I can assure you they would give exactly the same orders."

That satisfied Scott that Uhura was acting with Kirk's approval. "Verra well, sir. But tell the Klingons not to try movin' a single planetary diameter farther out than they are now. If they do, we're goin' to open their ship up like a pre-stressed package of carbonated beverage."

Kumara chuckled. "Such belligerence!" The amusement didn't last but a couple of seconds. "That's enough," he instructed his communications officer. "Keep monitoring both *Enterprise* and local frequencies. I want to know if and when any of the involved parties contemplates aggressive action."

"Yes, Honored Captain," the communications chief replied efficiently.

Another officer called out. "The *Enterprise* is raising defensive screens, sir. Energy readings indicate that she is activating her phasers!"

"Calm down, Kivord," the Klingon commander said. "They're just warning us not to do anything without informing them first of our intent." His gaze traveled to Uhura-kirk and Leader Sarvus. "We have no intentions of trying anything without your knowledge . . . and consent."

Leader Sarvus recognized a negotiating cue when it was offered to him. "You mentioned we might to an arrangement come," he murmured resignedly. "What sort of arrangement? You must know there is nothing I, a single individual, can do concerning the decision of the Council."

Kumara took his time, walked away from them and sat down in the command chair. "I realize that we cannot force Briamos to rescind its verbal agreement with the Federation, no matter how much more beneficial an alliance with Klingon would be."

This time Sarvus didn't bother to sneer. "Whatever chance the Klingon Empire might have retained for future assignations with Briamos has been obliterated forever by your actions this day of," the Leader said woodenly.

"I'm aware of that." Kumara sounded disgusted. "Those who are foolish enough to join themselves to the Federation rarely manage to extricate themselves from their entrapment.

The Federation has numerous exceedingly devious methods for insuring that captive peoples never regain their independence of action. Once snared by Federation lies, a race can never free itself from that efficient network of agents, lies, and deceptions.

"However, we can do something else. If we cannot convince Briamos of the efficacy of aligning itself with the Empire, at least we can prevent you from making the fatal error of joining the Federation. You, Leader Sarvus, will sign treaty forms declaring yourselves to be permanent neutrals. You will make no alliance, mutual agreement of cooperation, or material exchange of any official sort with either the Federation *or* Klingon." Kumara leaned forward intently.

"Furthermore, Jim," he told Uhura-kirk, "you and your executive officer Spock will acknowledge witnessing this treaty. You will sign, in your official capacity as ambassadors-designate, treaty forms to the effect that the Federation will not violate Briamosite neutrality or attempt in any way to induce the Briamosites to ally themselves with the Federation any time in the future." He sat back in the command chair.

"I think that's a reasonable request, considering your present situation, Jim. If you consent to do this, then upon the signing and registering with relay stations of the treaty articles, you will all be permitted to return to your ship and you, Leader Sarvus, to your world, free and unharmed."

"I . . . I don't know what to do." Sarvus looked hopefully at Uhura-kirk.

She responded, staring straight at Kumara, with the same words she thought her captain would use. "You expect us to give in to political blackmail, Kumara? If you kill us, the *Enterprise* will take you apart deck by deck. If the *Enterprise* fails, the Briamosite fleet surely won't. The Briamosites will know what you've done because you'll have to kill Leader Sarvus also. Once that's done, their alliance with the Federation will become stronger than ever. And there will be trouble on a scale you can't begin to imagine."

"Oh, I can imagine it," Kumara responded, unperturbed by Uhura-kirk's stormy reply. "I just don't think what you postulate could happen."

"You seem to place a great deal of confidence in the Federation's unwillingness to go to war."

Kumara executed the Klingon equivalent of a shrug. "A few officers lost here, a couple kidnapped there. That's not sufficient grounds for intergalactic war. Besides," he continued, smiling humorlessly at each of them in turn, "future political possibilities and the legality of the treaties you sign need not overly concern us here. What is actually at stake, now, here, this moment, is far simpler to grasp and balance: your lives. But there's no need," he added more easily, "to consider such extreme possibilities." The smile returned. "I can see that in order to convince you to see clearly, some persuasion beyond mere logic is going to be necessary . . ."

XVI

The Klingon bridge was silent save for the steady thrumming of instruments as the prisoners considered that first direct, ominous threat.

"This is the so-called civilization you considered allying yourselves with," Uhura-kirk said sadly to the towering Briamosite leader.

"Forgive us," Sarvus replied. "We were ignorant of true facts. That has now changed."

"One of our respective moral codes is not necessarily better than the other," Kumara observed, "simply different." He turned his gaze on Uhura's form. Spock regarded the Klingon commander calmly out of Uhura's eyes.

"Say what you mean," snapped Uhura-kirk. "Your attempts at rationalizing criminal behavior aren't fooling anyone."

Kumara ignored her, glanced at the Briamosite leader. "I think we can demonstrate the sniveling sentimentality of the Federation races in the face of danger, Leader Sarvus. It will serve to illustrate the undependability of the Federation in difficult situations. For example, it is enlightening to know," he went on, his attention returning to Spock-uhura, "that humans are absurdly irrational when it comes to threats to females of their species. All I need to do is threaten one of them. That one," and he pointed suddenly at Spock-uhura, "with bodily harm, and they will rapidly capitulate to the most unreasonable demands. Are those the kind of people you wish as allies?"

Kumara looked around the bridge, beckoned to one of the guards standing near the elevator doors. "Kora. Present yourself."

A massive Klingon ensign left his station and marched over. He was a young, hugely muscled specimen and stood nearly as high as Leader Sarvus's shoulders, towering over everyone else on the bridge.

"A little demonstration can be entertaining as well as instructive," Kumara said easily.

Uhura-kirk looked outraged. "This is barbaric, Kumara!"

"Perhaps. Sometimes old methods are best, however." Kumara glanced up at the waiting, silent ensign, then pointed across the bridge. "That one, the female."

Kora nodded, grinning wickedly.

"Not too fast, mind you," Kumara instructed the bulky soldier. "I have to give our guests plenty of time to change their minds about my proposal."

Sulu-spock took a step in front of Uhura's body. "You can't let this go further."

"Why not?" Kumara appeared to be enjoying himself thoroughly. "I see no one who is going to stop me."

Several other guards now focused their weapons on the other three officers.

"It's all right, sir," insisted Spock with Uhura's voice, as he stepped out to confront the Klingon fighter. He looked at Kumara. "Let us proceed."

"Brave lady," the Klingon commander said. Privately, he was disappointed. She should be cowering in terror, as obviously outmatched as she was. Well, Kora would change her attitude fast enough, and perhaps her face as well.

"Don't try to interfere, Captain," said Spock-uhura to the real owner of the body he was using. "I'll . . . take care of things."

Kumara stepped down out of the command chair, gave further instructions to his fighter. "Remember," he whispered, "I don't want her killed. Rearranged convincingly, yes, but not killed,"

"I will be careful, Honored Captain," the soldier insisted. Kumara nodded, then stepped out of the way. The huge Klingon advanced on Uhura's body, arms outstretched.

"You can stop this any time you wish, Jim," he told Uhura-kirk, "by agreeing to my requests."

Uhura-kirk looked agonized over the situation. Actually, it was a cover to allow Uhura a covert glance at Kirk-sulu. When the captain appeared content to let events take their course,

she wiped the concern from her/his face and watched the open space in the middle of the bridge.

The Klingon reached out with a long, thick arm. Spock-uhura's leg whirled up and around in a peculiarly forceful kick that battered the grasping arm violently to one side. The kick was followed by a hand that thrust straight at the Klingon's solar plexus. Even with Uhura's lighter musculature behind it, the well-directed strike carried plenty of impact.

Kora *whooshed*, looked surprised, and backed away clutching at his middle.

"Don't fool around, Ensign," ordered an irritated Kumara.

"I was not, Honored Captain," Kora growled. Glowering ferociously at Uhura's form, he approached more cautiously. The combatants warily circled each other.

This time the Klingon feinted with a kick of his own. Before he could withdraw the feint, Spock-uhura's hands came up in a strange way and caught the leg. They twisted, applying leverage as well as force. With a crash the Klingon fighter tumbled to the deck. Several of the other Klingon crew members murmured in confusion among themselves.

Breathing hard, Spock-uhura stepped back as the ensign slowly climbed to his feet. If Spock had been using his own body, Kora would not be getting off the deck. He was trying to compensate for lack of strength with skill.

"Watch him, Uhura," Uhura-kirk warned.

It was a deserved warning. Doubly embarrassed now in front of his crewmates and captain, the ensign had turned an apparently routine assignment into a personal vendetta. He advanced carefully, giving Spock-uhura all the respect he would a Klingon male.

Spock-uhura thrust with an arm. A Vulcan arm would not have been blocked, but Kora just barely managed to deflect Uhura's slimmer limb. Forsaking any hint of subtlety, the much bigger, heavier Klingon rushed past the extended arm, charging blindly into the communications officer's body.

They fell to the deck. Powerful arms locked around Spock-uhura's waist and began to tighten. Spock knew he would have to do something fast or the body he was inhabiting would soon pass out.

Bending and moaning as if in dire distress, he reached back with one hand concealed beneath the two entwined bodies. It came up behind the Klingon soldier, caught at his neck in the difficult-to-duplicate fashion which only a born Vulcan could truly master, and pinched.

The massive shape of the ensign went suddenly limp. Spock extricated himself from beneath the Klingon bulk, stood up panting, and looked around.

Puzzled and angry mutterings came from the Klingon crew members. One, another guard, bent over the unconscious Kora's body, threw a bewildered look at Captain Kumara and an even more uncertain one at the retreating form of Spock-uhura, who had moved to stand alongside his companions.

"Well?" an angry yet confused Kumara said.

"Ensign Kora is alive but unmoving, Honored Captain," the inspecting guard declared. "If I did not know better, I would say he has been somehow paralyzed."

"Impossible!" Kumara gazed in disbelief at Spock-uhura. "He must have struck his head on the deck."

"Face up to it, Kumara," said Uhura-kirk, "our Lieutenant Uhura defeated your chosen fighter fairly by Klingon standards, and by Klingon law you can't force her to fight again."

"Yes, yes, I know." Kumara was desperately trying to salvage something of the disastrous situation. A glance at the Briamosite clearly showed that the honor of Klingon had suffered in the eyes of an inferior alien race. That was embarrassing.

Then he brightened, having thought of a way to turn a defeat into victory. "I have done what I really intended, Leader Sarvus, which was to fool these representatives of a heartless government into displaying their true inclinations. They are dedicated only to the arts of war, as their attitude just now proves."

"How can *you* say that?" interjected Sulu-spock, stepping forward. "You who are of Klingon, one of the most militaristic societies in galactic history. You have no room for honest feelings, for the good things of civilization such as art and poetry and song!"

This wholly impossible emotional outburst from the *Enterprise*'s executive officer left Kumara without words. "Poetry . . . Ah, you mean the coldly logical mathematical precision of rhymes."

"Oh no, no!" Sulu-spock protested vehemently. "Members of all Federation races are sensitive to all aspects of creative endeavor. Myself, I often prefer free verse."

Spock-uhura shuddered at that, but no one noticed.

"From the heartrending strains of Szygenic music," Sulu-spock was saying passionately, "to the loose mind-stanzas of M'radd of Cait. Some of those sonnets are so . . . so . . ." Sulu-spock wiped away a tear. The unfamiliar precipitation burned, but Sulu bore it stoically. "You'll have to excuse me," he said, the tears flowing freely now. "The mere thought of his poetry causes me to lose all control."

If Kumara had been flabbergasted by the diminutive Lieutenant Uhura's prowess at hand-to-hand combat, the sight of a sobbing Vulcan was unreal enough to paralyze him almost as completely as was the still-unconscious Ensign Kora.

Uhura-kirk jumped into the silence. "You see, Kumara, you can't win. You can't threaten us into signing those treaty forms, and now you'll never convince this gentlebeing," and she indicated the Briamosite leader, "that everything you say isn't a lie."

"No doubt there is to that," Sarvus declared with finality.

No one could tell if Kumara heard any of this. He was in a state of shock, first from seeing one of his most powerful warriors knocked silly by a delicate human female, and second by the sight of an emotionally upset Vulcan.

Finally he blinked, seemed to see them clearly again. "There are a great many things in this universe I do not pretend to understand," he declared softly, with more modesty than the average Klingon fighter, "and today's events are among them."

He turned to face Uhura-kirk. "I concede this conference to you, Jim. I cannot continue playing the game while I doubt the evidence of my own eyes. You have won a round, not a war. But while I do not know how you have done what you have done here, I still can win a greater victory. You may

return to the surface of Briamos," and he smiled mirthlessly, "but *that* remains aboard." He gestured at the glowing cube beneath Kirk-sulu's arm.

"That's not possible," insisted Uhura-kirk, playing her part to the hilt. "You know what the Federation's reaction would be if we turned over an unopened stasis box to you."

"My dear Jim, how outraged you can be. You have no choice in the matter. I am not a believer in useless causes, so I will not kill you when there is no benefit to it. Briamos has married itself, sadly for them, to the Federation. Similarly, it is useless for you to insist on retaining the stasis box. It is allied to no one. It remains here, with me. I would rather have it than Briamos anyway." He threw Sarvus a contemptuous look. The dignified Briamosite leader was not affected.

Uhura-kirk turned to Sulu-spock. "Mr. Spock, your opinion?"

"It is a risk, Captain. The box hopefully contains nothing dangerous to the Federation. Captain Kumara is correct when he says we have no choice. He risks a major diplomatic incident over the theft, but that is his problem. We can do nothing except refuse transport. By moving within the field, we could conceivably kill ourselves, thus inviting attack by the *Enterprise* and Briamosite ships. But we have someone besides ourselves to consider." He indicated the watching Leader. "We cannot ask him to risk his life."

"Don't for me worry, gentlebeings," Sarvus said. "If you believe that box would be so valuable to these . . . creatures"—and he gestured at Kumara, who bristled but did not reply—"then I am here quite prepared to die."

"No. It would be useless," Uhura-kirk said, seemingly despondent but actually trying hard not to laugh. "Kumara would still have the box." She composed herself, faced the Klingon commander.

"We accept your offer because we have no choice. I'm betting the box contains nothing the Empire can use."

"A wise choice, Jim." Kumara was feeling progressively better about things. What matter a few systems? They had gained a Slaver stasis box! "Naturally, the box may be empty. Who knows?" He waved at the guards. "Escort them all back

to the transporter room and have them beamed down to their previous positions."

The four Federation officers and Sarvus were herded from the room, Kumara's attention turned to the box. Walking over to where Kirk-sulu had placed it on the deck, he picked it up. Turning it over and over in his hands he finally placed it on the floor next to the command chair, basking in its strong azure glow.

"Klaythia," he called to his chief science officer, "set up a field nullifier."

"Immediately, Honored Captain."

"Perhaps this will contain the final weapon," Kumara murmured as he stared at the metal cube. "The device which will enable us to achieve our destiny and wipe the decadent Federation from this part of the galaxy, so that we may expand as was intended for us in the Great Scheme of Things." He walked around the box, inspecting it from all sides.

"And even if it is empty," he concluded with delight, "Kirk will have no way of knowing that. It will always prey on his thoughts that he might have given us an all-powerful discovery. At least, if nothing else, I will gain personal satisfaction from this unfortunate conference!"

The instant the five former prisoners had rematerialized on the surface of Briamos, before the startled gaze of two guards in the otherwise empty conference chamber, Uhura-kirk turned to the Briamosite leader.

"I hope you'll excuse us if we depart quickly, sir. There are reasons to think Captain Kumara might try to go back on his decision letting us go. We'll be safely out of the grip of the Klingon transporters back on the *Enterprise*. And some simple adjustments in your own communications equipment will prevent him from beaming you aboard also."

"No need to worry about that." Sarvus's reply was calm, but his ears were semaphoring like leaves in a hurricane. Other excited Briamosites were entering the room, having been called by the two guards. Several turned as soon as they entered, departing on the run. "I have just given orders for

our ships to attack, assuming the Klingon beast has been foolish enough to linger within range of our weapons." He sounded curious now. "But why should the Klingon risk waiting here to try and recapture you? He has gained the valuable box. Surely he should be speeding away from this spatial vicinity to avoid pursuit by your ship."

"He might try to come back," Uhura-kirk told the Leader.

"We'll beam a complete explanation to you, sir," Kirk-sulu said, unable to restrain himself any longer. Ignoring Leader Sarvus's increasingly confused expression, he flipped open his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise*."

"*Enterprise* here," came the prompt response. "Engineer Scott spea—" There was a pause, then Scott added excitedly, "Captain! You're back on the surface. What—?"

"Tell you soon, Scotty. Beam us up immediately and prepare to get underway."

"But I . . . Aye, Captain. Stand by."

Kirk flipped off the communicator. While he didn't think Kumara would return on discovering that the stasis box had been opened previously and that the instrument generating its "stasis field" was a fake of Federation manufacture, he did not want to linger around Briamos to find out. The Briamosites could take care of themselves. While he didn't necessarily relish the thought of someone else destroying Kumara, diplomatically it would be better if the Federation wasn't involved.

Four pillars of multicolored energy filled the conference chamber. Beyond, tall pleasure-seekers enjoyed the warm waters of the cliff-cupped bay and the white gypsum sands, ignorant of the drama that had been played out during their vacation times.

Before his vision faded, Kirk saw the Leader of the United Systems of Briamos waving to them. His perpetually frozen expression had finally shattered, and he was smiling with his face as well as his ears, as if to insure beyond a doubt that Briamos and its sister worlds would remain a staunch and valuable addition to the Federation civilization for many centuries to come.

Kirk was no more disoriented than usual when he rematerialized back on board the *Enterprise*. Scott was manning the transporter console himself. When Kirk took a step toward the engineer, out of the alcove, he nearly stumbled awkwardly. It was an awkwardness, however, born of renewed familiarity. At the same instant he was looking down at himself, there came a startled exclamation from behind him.

"Captain!"

The voice and form were those of his helmsman, Lieutenant Sulu. But *he* had been occupying Sulu's body! And if Sulu was standing there, healthy and composed *behind* him, that meant that he—

Sulu finished the thought for him. "Captain, we're back in our own bodies!"

"So it would appear, Lieutenant." Spock stepped out of the alcove, looking expectantly toward the transporter console.

Scott trotted around to greet them, beaming with personal as well as professional satisfaction. "I tried to tell you, Captain, but you told me to beam you up *fast*. I figured that explanations weren't necessary anyhow. Besides, there was a *chance* it wouldn't work, that I hadn't made the repairs completely or properly."

"Unlikely, Mr. Scott, if you felt confident enough to beam us back up without warning us first."

Spock's comment was delivered with his usual seeming indifference, but Scott knew the first officer well enough to recognize a supreme compliment when he heard one. Spock's seemingly unconcerned statement meant more to the chief engineer than a fistful of written commendations.

He accepted it as matter-of-factly, however, as it had been given—one professional, high-ranking officer to another.

"I don't know about the rest of you," Sulu said, "but I feel like I'd been wearing the same set of clothes for twenty years and just had them cleaned for the first time."

"It's strange," Kirk agreed, "to be back in something you never imagined being without." He smiled tightly at his chief engineer. "Thanks, Scotty. Ship's status?"

"Ready to leave Briamos orbit, Captain. All stations alerted and waiting."

"Then we'd better get underway." He moved to the nearest intercom, flipped it to open mode.

"Bridge, this is the captain speaking," he said forcefully, thoroughly enjoying the sound of his own voice inside his head.

"Is it really the captain?" came the uncertain reply. Kirk recognized the gentle voice of Lieutenant Arex.

"It is, Lieutenant. We're all back in our own homes again. Warp-factor three, set course for Starbase Twenty-Five. I'll be up in a second."

"Very good, sir. And sir?"

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"It's great to have you back where you belong."

"Thanks, Mr. Arex." Kirk grinned at the ancient snatch of song. "We feel the same. Kirk out."

Uhura stepped down out of the alcove, still a little dizzy from reintegration, in more sense than one. "You can go now, Mr. Scott."

The chief eyed her oddly. "I beg your pardon, Lieutenant?"

She looked abruptly embarrassed. "I'm sorry, sir. I was still playing the captain."

"And you did a conference-saving job of it, too, Lieutenant Uhura." Kirk eyed each one of them in turn. "That's something which will go into everyone's records. Let's go."

As they stepped into the waiting turbolift car, Kirk noticed that the communications officer was limping. Old fears came back. Perhaps Scott's rectifier hadn't been one hundred percent corrected. "What's the trouble, Lieutenant?" he inquired uneasily.

"I've got a bruise that feels like it covers the whole back of my right leg, sir," she replied feelingly, "and both my arms weigh about twice normal."

"I am sorry about that, Lieutenant Uhura." Spock sounded apologetic. "It was difficult enough for me to counter the size and strength of the Klingon soldier Captain Kumara pitted against me. I'm afraid I was forced to employ muscular

arrangements which your body is not familiar with, as well as blocking off certain neural responses in order to shut off pain so I could remain functioning."

Uhura winced, rubbed at the back of her injured leg. "I wish you'd been a little more careful, Mr. Spock. I'm pretty proud of this body myself and I don't like having it banged up."

"Truly, I'm sorry, Lieutenant. If there had been another way of avoiding the damage, I assure you I would have employed it."

They emerged on the bridge to be greeted by a number of uncertain stares. As soon as it was made abundantly clear to all that the four officers were back in their original selves, the bridge personnel relaxed.

One who was waiting to greet them on their return strolled over to the command chair as soon as Kirk had seated himself.

"If you've no objection, Jim, there's something I'd like to request of you." McCoy indicated Uhura, Sulu, and Spock. "Of all of you."

"What is it, Bones?"

"When we're well on our way, I'd like to interview you four and record the interviews. I think the results would make an excellent monograph, one I'd like to submit for publication in the *Journal of Starfleet Physicians*. Mind-to-body transposition has been accomplished surgically, via transplant, but never before by transporter. If we could determine how to do it safely and repeatedly, there could be enormous potential benefits for—"

Sulu glanced back over a shoulder from his position at the helm-navigation console. "Just as long as I don't have to go through it again, Doctor."

"Nor I, Lieutenant," added Spock from behind the science console, in a tone that was not truly emotion-laden but that carried plenty of impact.

Kirk checked the main viewscreen. Stars showed brilliant against the velvet blanket of space where Briamos had recently rode. They were well on their way. "The Klingons

should be opening the stasis box about now. Don't you think so, Mr. Spock?"

"Yes, Captain."

Kirk was unable to suppress a sly smile. "Wonder what they're going to say when they find nothing inside except a small generator projecting a simulated stasis field?"

Spock sounded unexpectedly uncertain. "The scenario you envision is not entirely in keeping with the facts, Captain."

Frowning in puzzlement, Kirk turned in the command chair, stared at his first officer. "What do you mean, Spock?"

"It was not my idea, Captain." Spock almost sounded embarrassed. "It was done at Chief Scott's insistence. I remonstrated with him, insisting that it was a juvenile notion, but the chief can be difficult to dissuade when he fixes on a particular idea. Also, he has less tolerance for the Klingons than most of us. I could, despite my personal position, see no harm in allowing him to proceed."

"Proceed? Proceed with what? Spock, what are you talking about?" Kirk didn't know whether to be upset or consoling. Here he was sure the entire Briamos incident was behind him, and now Spock seemed to be hinting that something had been done without his, Kirk's, knowledge. The first officer's comment about Scotty's well-known dislike for the Klingons only made him more nervous. They had escaped Briamos with a solid commitment from its inhabitants, while avoiding any dangerous encounter with the Klingons. But now—

What had Scott done . . .?

Kumara and his science staff had adjourned to a sealed, double-walled room. They stood behind a portable shield, watching through the superdense but transparent plate as the field nullifier continued to hum at the stasis box.

"Something's wrong," Kumara muttered uneasily. The nullifier had been operating for several long moments, yet the blue aura surrounding the box had not disappeared as it should have.

"I do not understand, Honored Captain," his equally concerned science chief said. "All settings and power levels are correct. The instrumentation is not complex and follows

precisely the schematics set down in the manuals for such a nullifier. The aura should vanish. It should have vanished long before now."

"Try successively lower power settings, Klaythia," the Klingon commander suggested.

"I will try, sir." Klaythia adjusted controls on the remote he held. The third setting he tried produced an audible click. The blue halo vanished instantly. Everyone in the room was satisfied, except Klaythia.

"I don't understand, sir," he murmured uncertainly. "This stasis-field generator is operating at a much lower output than any previously recorded level for a Slaver box.

"There's a first time even for stasis boxes, Klaythia. Since the box itself generates the field, anything is possible. Maybe this box is especially old and its power has failed." He sounded pleased. "It may contain a particularly valuable device, to have been sealed for so long."

He was leading the assembled science officers toward the box, which sat on a low table in the center of the otherwise empty room. This was a great moment for the Empire!

A low whine sounded from within the box, rising rapidly in volume to a dangerous howling. The party of Klingons froze.

"Is that normal, Honored Captain?" asked one of the lower-ranking specialists.

"No. No, I've never heard of it happening before," declared Kumara, taking a cautious step backward.

The whining increased. Powerful lights began to glow, pulsing unevenly from the slowly opening top of the box. The whine became a scream and the box started to quiver and bounce on the table.

Kumara and the other Klingons continued their steady retreat, eyes glued in fascination to the dancing box. "Something went wrong with the nullifier, Klaythia. We've set off some kind of previously unknown type of Slaver self-protection device."

"No . . . Honored Captain." Even now Klaythia was more afraid of his commander's wrath than of what the increasingly energetic box might do. "I assure you, all was checked and rechecked before the nullifier was activated. It is operating

properly. I admit I cannot account for the way the top of the box is opening without manual assistance but—"

There was a loud *bang* from within the box and several howls of despair from the assembled officers and specialists. The box jumped several meters, hit the right-side wall, leaped to the ceiling, then fell to the deck again, while the Klingons scrambled to open the sealed door.

The box lay still. Two officers paused, half in, half out the opened doorway.

A violent explosion blew the top of the box roofward. Most of the Klingons broke and ran in terror, shoving each other aside in their haste to escape. More colored lights shone from the box's interior. Flashes of bright, colored smoke appeared, formed glowing symbols in the smoky air of the chamber.

Kumara squinted, coughing in the haze. He discovered he recognized the symbols. They were Federation script and spelled out:

FEDERATION FOREVER!

And below that:

DOWN KLINGON!

Now the noises from inside the box organized themselves into a coherent pattern. Klaythia, who had flattened himself to the deck at the initial violent explosion, looked up thoughtfully. Kumara lay next to him and was climbing to his feet.

"I believe, Honored Captain, that those sounds are an electronic rendition of the Federation Interstellar Anthem."

"Imbecile!" Kumara belted his science chief hard across the mouth, even as he was drawing his sidearm. "I am all too familiar with the insulting propaganda contained in that wailing that passes for music among humans!"

Aiming the sidearm at the cheerfully tooting box, he fired. There was a small *ke-rummp* as the box blew apart. The music died out slowly and rather pitiably. Kumara fired again, at the glowing words floating in the atmosphere of the chamber. The burst passed through the letters, blew a smoking hole in the far wall. He could only hope the infuriating words would fade before anyone else saw them. He

turned away, confronted the face of a security officer who had gathered enough courage to peek back into the room.

"No one," he said angrily to the soldier, "is to enter this room until those obscene symbols have been cleansed from the air, and this debris disposed of. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Honored Captain." The security officer withdrew hurriedly.

Walking back into the room, he holstered his sidearm and kicked contemptuously at the shattered rubble of the box. Most of the container had been vaporized or melted by his weapon.

"Let this remain always in your memory, Klaythia," he told his science chief, "as an indication of the fiendish way in which the human mind works."

"It will, sir," said the subdued Klaythia. He stared mournfully at the remnants of the box. "What a shame, sir . . . All that valuable Slaver metal, gone."

Kumara let those words sink home. Realization filled him.

Kirk was just a light-minute too far away to hear the stream of curses that filled the chamber on board the Klingon cruiser.

THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

(Adapted from a script by David P. Harmon)

I

"Captain's log, stardate 5537.1. The *Enterprise* is embarked, for a change, on a routine follow-up mission—to search for a survey ship overdue for report-in in the vicinity of Epsilon Scorpii, last known to be investigating the system of a G4 sun designated Lactra on Federation starcharts."

He clicked off and studied the nearing globe and the yellowish, slightly hot sun beyond. The world and its star were no different from hundreds he'd examined personally or on tape. Yet past experience had shown that the innocuous-appearing worlds were often the ones full of surprises—planet-sized paranoia-inducing *piñatas*.

The continuing silence of the survey crew the *Enterprise* was here to locate *could* be due to some easily explainable equipment failure or minor human error. Could be.

But Kirk was a veteran starship captain, and he always wore two uniforms on such missions: Starfleet regulation pull-ons and an intense, personal wariness.

At the moment there was nothing to hint that Lactra VII was anything other than the recently discovered, inoffensive world it appeared to be. Only the small, obviously artificial shape growing slowly and silently larger on the main screen suggested otherwise.

The vessel was a long-range limited scout, of a minor class designed for extensive exploration of possible colonial worlds. It carried a small crew of first-contact xenologists and no frills, moving at high speed on an unvarying course from starbase to eventual destination. Its large quantity of complex instrumentation was announced by the bristling array of antennae, external sensor pickups, and other intricate detection equipment which almost obliterated the small hull.

Kirk noted with satisfaction that the scout looked undamaged. That probably ruled out any messy natural disasters such as meteorite collision and, more important,

interference from some inimical spacegoing race. "Disarm phasers, Mr. Sulu," he instructed the helmsman.

"Phasers disarmed, sir."

The captain leaned toward the chair pickup and activated the log again. "Captain's log, supplemental. We have encountered and visually observed the missing survey ship. It continues to maintain communications silence." Glancing backward, he noted Lieutenant Uhura's confirming nod. All attempts to elicit some response from the craft had failed, though she continued trying.

"There is no evidence of violent damage or sentient attack. Mr. Spock will lead a security team in boarding the ship. End entry." Shutting off the recorder once again, he addressed another grid: "Transporter Room?"

"Chief Kyle here, Captain. Boarding party standing by."

"All right, Chief, send them aboard." He glanced backward. "Lieutenant Uhura, pick up visual and aural transmission as soon as transportation is complete."

"Standing ready, sir."

There was a tense pause, and then the view forward changed to an internal view of the scout. Kirk could see armed security personnel moving about as someone's visual scanner played around the ship's interior.

"Boarding party has integrated, Captain," a voice announced clearly . . . Spock's. "Our sensors were correct. Ship appears pressurized normally, temperature likewise."

The view shifted jumpily. Spock was walking through the cabin. "We are dispersing throughout the vessel, Captain."

"Any sign of life?" Kirk asked anxiously.

"Negative. There is ample evidence of previous tenancy, though. It looks as if the crew fully expected to return. There is nothing to indicate they were surprised, or removed forcibly from the ship. Personal effects are lying neatly about. There is no indication that the crew intended to leave their ship for an extended period."

"Very well, Mr. Spock. Continue your exploration."

Several hours sufficed to show that the only living things left on board the survey ship were laboratory animals.

Automatic feeders kept them healthy in the absence of the crew.

Spock did make one important discovery, however.

"Captain, Dr. McCoy," he began as they watched expectantly from around the small table in the Briefing Room, "we found this tape lying in the ship's library, next to the playback slot. There is a duplicate in the ship's banks, but this copy was deliberately placed in a prominent position, obviously to attract the attention of anyone entering the library."

He picked up the small cassette and slid it into a slot set in the table, then depressed the play switch. Attention was focused now on the three-sided viewer which popped up in the table's center.

The tape showed a tense, worried officer in the uniform of Federation Sciences. He was staring into the pickup.

"It is now thirty-two minutes since our last contact with the three members of our crew who beamed down to the planetary surface," the man declaimed. "Each member of that crew was instructed to report in at ten-minute intervals.

"As this deadline has long since passed, and subsequent to our repeated failure to contact any member of the landing party, I have decided to take the following action. As senior officer aboard I, Lieutenant Commander Louis Markel, take full responsibility for this action and any consequences thereof." He coughed awkwardly, then continued on:

"All three remaining members of the survey team, myself included, will beam down in an attempt to discover the whereabouts of our comrades and, if necessary, to effect a rescue. If for any reason we should fail to return I, Lieutenant Commander Louis Markel, do hereby accept and acknowledge that—"

It was too much for Kirk. He jabbed the cancel switch and both picture and audio died. McCoy looked at him questioningly and saw that the captain was struggling to suppress a rising fury.

"What's the trouble, Jim?" he inquired quietly.

Kirk glared at him, the angry words tumbling over one another. "Blatant disregard of standard emergency procedure

. . . utter suppression of survey orders! I tell you, Bones, there's no excuse for—"

"Apparently the lieutenant commander felt the need was pretty desperate, Jim," McCoy interrupted softly. "His friends had vanished, and he decided going after them was more important than anything else."

Kirk calmed down slightly, but McCoy could see the anger still simmering. "It doesn't matter, Bones. Letting personal feelings get in the way of Starfleet regs . . ." He sighed. "Since when were human beings otherwise?"

"True, Captain," commented Spock.

"Regulations specifically state, Bones, that in a situation like this at least two members of the crew—the minimum necessary to operate a ship this size—must remain aboard. In the event that contact with the other four team members is lost, they are to return to the nearest starbase beam region and file a full report. I don't care if the team commander is a full admiral. Regulations must be followed. They were created for a reason. Any sign of danger to Federation civilization . . ."

"But, Jim, there was no sign of danger," McCoy pointed out.

"That does not alter the fact, Doctor, that the survey ship's commander made what is essentially a personal decision," Spock observed.

Now it was McCoy's turn to explode. "Spock, you Vulcans are the most unimaginative, unbending . . .!"

"Easy, easy Bones," soothed Kirk. "You're starting to sound like me." He waited until McCoy had calmed himself, then continued briskly. "None of this is helping the situation any. Nor is it helping Commander Markel and his people—assuming they're still down there and in a position to make use of our help. Barring positive evidence to the contrary, we have to assume that they are."

"Sorry, Jim. Spock just has a way of getting to me sometimes." McCoy grinned. "It's an inborn talent, I guess."

Spock replied amiably, "Some humans are rather more easily gotten to than others, Doctor."

"Mr. Spock," Kirk continued, "what can we expect to find on Lactra Seven?"

"We have little information on the world below us," the first officer began thoughtfully. "What we do have is the result of the drone's preliminary report, coupled with information drawn from the survey ship's library. We may assume this basic information is fairly accurate. Our own sections are working to confirm this now.

"Lactra Seven is a Class-M world. Gravity is approximately Earth-normal, the atmosphere a reasonable analog of Earth-Vulcan. Very little additional useful information is on file. By useful I mean material which could aid in the locating and rescuing of the missing crew. What we do have is available in the printouts before you."

Kirk picked up the slim bundle of sheets and leafed through them. "According to the survey ship's log, Commander Markel and the other remaining members of his crew beamed down six weeks ago."

"Five weeks, three days, two hours, to be precise, Captain," Spock corrected.

"Careless of me, Mr. Spock." He finished scanning the printouts, then let the sheets drop. "No indication of planetary life forms."

"And in particular, of intelligent or large, dangerous ones—that is true, Captain," Spock admitted. "Life sensors are experiencing some difficulty in penetrating a distortion layer in the Lactran atmosphere.

"Given the composition of that atmosphere, the surface temperature, and the presence of large bodies of free water, I would suspect Lactra Seven harbors a considerable amount of life. But without additional data I cannot speculate on the form such life has taken." His brows drew together.

"Despite the distortion layer, the survey ship was specially equipped for obtaining just such information. Their records were surprisingly deficient in this area, one of primary concern to any survey team. Apparently they had no sooner entered into Lactran orbit when this emergency overwhelmed them. Mr. Arex is overseeing a full, detailed sensor scan, which should reveal the relevant information," he finished.

"Eventually," Kirk added. "Anything like a comprehensive scan will take too long to complete, Mr. Spock. Minutes might

make the difference between life and death for Commander Markel and his people—if they're still alive. I want a landing party to beam down to the last recorded coordinates in the survey ship's tapes. If they've had the sense to remain in that immediate area we might be able to find them quickly."

"Don't you think that's taking an extreme risk, Jim?" put in McCoy. "If the first three were lost—and remember, they never beamed up any hint that something was wrong, no warning or anything—then we might run into the same silencing trouble."

"True, Bones. But if they experienced some kind of mechanical problem, the risk might be in leaving them stranded while we take endless readings. It might involve that distorting atmospheric layer. For example, maybe it affected their communicators. That would explain why the first crew was unable to contact the ship, and why the second crew failed to activate the transporter to bring them back.

"They could be starving down there, sitting on their acquired information and waiting for someone to haul them out. We have to find out. They could have survived for six weeks. They might not be able to survive six and a half."

"Still a risk," McCoy objected.

Kirk's reply was matter-of-fact. "That's why we're here, Bones." He rose from his seat. "We'll travel light, gentlemen. Phasers, tricorders, communicators—and you'll take a full medical kit, Doctor."

It took only minutes to gather the necessary paraphernalia; then the three officers met in the Transporter Room. Scott was waiting for them. He would handle the beam-down personally.

"Any new information from Sciences, Mr. Scott?" Kirk inquired as they exited from the elevator lift and crossed to the alcove.

"A little, sir," the chief engineer reported. "Mr. Arex says that the distortion layer has been penetrated sufficiently for sensors to reveal a large variety of life forms on the surface. There are substantial concentrations in the area scheduled for your landing, Captain."

McCoy voiced the thought uppermost in their minds. "Any indication of intelligent life?"

"No, Doctor, none." Experienced hands moved over the controls, adjusting settings, checking energy levels. Playing with a man's molecules was a dangerous business.

"No large clusters of life forms in urban patterns, and no hints of city outlines. No rural patterns indicative of large-scale agriculture."

Kirk nodded. "You've set in the coordinates taken from the survey ship's transporter tape? That's where we want to be put down, Scotty."

"Beggin' your pardon, sir," he countered hesitantly, "but if I beam you down in the same place, you could run into the same trouble . . . and end up the same way. Quiet."

"We'll be expecting exactly that, Scotty," Kirk explained. "At the first sign of anything we can't handle, we'll beam back up. Proceed with transporting."

Scott shook his head, ever the pessimist, and mumbled under his breath. That didn't affect the precision with which he engaged the transporter controls. Triple levers rose, and the three officers dissolved into elsewhere.

Kirk experienced the momentary blackout, the disorientation, and the usual twinge of nausea. Then he materialized in an oven.

A blast of humid, hot air struck him like a sockful of hot mud. That first unexpected blast seemed hotter than it actually was. But while conditions at the set-down point were far from arctic, they were bearable.

After checking his footing he turned and took in their surroundings. They were standing on the bank of a steaming lake—Kirk assumed it was a lake; but it could as easily have been an ocean—he couldn't see land across it. Hot springs gurgled all around them, filling the air with feathery streamers of pure steam.

The thermal activity around them was as intense as in the Waimangu valley on Earth—noisy and nervous. But the ground underfoot was firm and gave every indication of having been so for some time. So Kirk discarded his first thought—that the survey crews might have set down on some

unstable area, despite the safeguards inherent in transporter sensors.

"Everyone all right?"

Spock nodded, then McCoy.

"Ten meters either way, though," the doctor pointed out, "and we'd have been boiled alive."

Spock already had his science tricorder out and was taking preliminary environmental readings. He frowned. "Unusual that such a lake, of such extent, could exist under the planetary conditions prevalent at this latitude. Most unusual."

"Speaking of unusual, Spock . . ." Kirk interjected. He was pointing at the surface of the lake directly before them.

A shape was rising from the steaming water. One could read the writhing steam into fantastical forms, but this rapidly growing outline was composed of something considerably more solid than water vapor.

It had a saucer-shaped body, limbs of still unseen design but obvious power, and a short, snakelike neck. A vision of quite adequate ugliness bobbed atop that swaying extension.

Spock nonchalantly turned toward it and readjusted his tricorder to take a biologically rather than geologically oriented reading. He studied the results with undivided attention as they appeared in the tiny readouts.

"Most intriguing," he finally commented.

"I'm not sure 'intriguing' is the word I'd choose," Kirk said, taking a step backward. "That creature may be able to navigate on land as well as in the water." Certainly the apparition showed no sign of slackening its pace.

"I know it can," an excited McCoy decided nervously, "and I don't need a tricorder to tell me so."

In truth, the alien being appeared to be accelerating as it neared them. Beneath heavily lidded eyes, black pupils stared at them with the single-minded blankness of the primitive carnivore. The interlocking fangs which protruded sicklelike from both jaws parted slightly, revealing an uninviting dark gullet.

"Phasers on stun," Kirk ordered sharply. "Stand ready."

Each man pulled out one of the compact weapons, adjusted the tiny wheel on top, and dropped to one knee. Spock held his phaser in one hand and the still-operating tricorder in the other. Both were aimed with precision.

The monster reached the shoreline, and any question of its ability to navigate a nonaquatic environment was answered as it humped enthusiastically toward them.

"Fire!"

Three bursts traversed the space between the men and the huge monster. The creature halted its seallike advance, faltering. The long neck lowered and swung dazedly from side to side.

A second round stopped the monster as if it had frozen. It sat on the shore, momentarily paralyzed. The nightmarish skull dipped until it scraped the sand.

Then, amazingly, it seemed to shake off the effects of the double phaser blast. Its appetite gave way to a blind desire to escape, however. Turning with surprising agility, it rushed back into the lake and vanished beneath the steaming surface.

"Not a very friendly environment," Kirk observed idly, kicking at the warm earth. "I think the survey crew would have come to a similar conclusion." He turned. "They'd probably try for a friendlier area inland. Let's move."

Picking their way cautiously between pools of bubbling clear water and thick, candylike mud, they started away from the water's edge. Once, Kirk knelt to probe the ground with a finger, and pulled it away speedily. The soil here was painfully hot just beneath the surface, but it was stable.

"What do you think, Mr. Spock?" he asked, referring to their first encounter with a representative of Lactran life.

"An interesting and no doubt dangerous animal, Captain," the first officer replied easily, "but not particularly so, and clearly not invulnerable. Certainly not to the kind of weaponry a survey crew has available as standard equipment.

"Nor is it the sort of beast one would expect to catch experienced personnel off-guard. Such teams regularly expect far more lethal attacks. For it to have surprised and rapidly killed not one but two such teams—no, Captain, I think it extremely unlikely."

"Exactly my opinion, Spock." They topped a modest rise and started down the other side. "In such a situation—"

He cut off in mid-sentence, staring in surprise at the land before them.

No steam rose there. There wasn't a hint of a boiling pool or steaming mud pit. The panorama before them was flat, hot—and dry. Only a few isolated outcroppings of weathered rock broke the gravel-and-sand plain. Here and there an occasional patch of defiant green stood out like a flag. The change was startling.

"Desert," muttered McCoy. "Not a very welcome sight either, gentlemen."

Kirk frowned as he pulled out his communicator. "We're on a hill here. Let's see if we can pick up anything on the emergency ground bands." He flipped open the communicator and made the requisite adjustments, then addressed it slowly and distinctly.

"This is Captain James Kirk of the U.S.S. *Enterprise*, commanding a Federation rescue party, calling the crew of the survey scout ship *Ariel*. Come in please, come in."

A faint whisper of wind on tired rock, nothing more.

"Try again, Jim," McCoy prompted.

"Captain James Kirk of the Federation cruiser *Enterprise* calling Lieutenant Commander Markel or any members of the Federation survey ship *Ariel*. Are you receiving me? Please acknowledge."

Still silence. Resignedly, he made a slight, standard readjustment on the receiver dial—and was rewarded with a surprise. A slow, steady beep began to sound.

McCoy was startled. "Be damned . . . they're answering!"

The beep continued for several seconds before stopping suddenly. But not before Kirk, who had been frantically adjusting further controls, registered an expression of satisfaction.

"You got a fix on it, Jim."

The captain nodded. "Barely. The signal didn't last very long, and I don't like the way it cut off like that, in the middle

of a series." He turned slightly to their left and pointed. "Over that way."

Picking their way down the slight slope, they started off in the indicated direction. "Likely they're close by, staying near the touchdown point like they're supposed to," Kirk murmured tautly. He squinted at the sky. "We'll try this until the heat begins to tell, then have Scotty beam us up for a rest. We can set down and continue on after a break."

"Don't you think it's strange we didn't get a voice reply to your call, Jim?" wondered a puzzled McCoy.

Kirk shrugged. "Could be any number of reasons we didn't. Mechanical trouble with the communicators, as we originally postulated, Bones."

"Never mind counting them, Spock," broke in McCoy dryly, seeing the first officer about to comment. They continued on across the sand in silence, searching for indications of human passage. There were none—no footprints, no trail of shredded tunic, no lost instruments or survival equipment. Nothing but harsh sky, sand, gravel, and heat that stayed just the human side of oppressive.

Nothing moved on that brown-and-yellow landscape. There was no soothing wind to ruffle the compact, squat green growths which leaned possessively to any hint of shade or depression in the ground.

Kirk spent no time studying them. A single casual glance was enough to show there was nothing remarkable about the largest, nothing distinctive about the smallest. It was the fate of six humans that absorbed his thoughts now, not new outposts of alien ecology.

Eventually they reached the other side of the gentle basin they had been crossing and mounted the symmetrical curve of a large dune. Their descent on its opposite side was as fast and awkward as the climb had been slow and controlled. They reached the sandy base and found themselves confronted by another basin, which terminated in a twin of the dune they had just crossed.

"At least it's not thermal springs and hot mud," McCoy observed.

There was a sound like frying fat, and a sheet of flame interdicted their progress. It missed Kirk, who was in the forefront of the little party, by a few saving meters. He scrambled backward.

Slightly to one side of their intended route the gritty yellow-and-brown soil erupted. Sand streamed from crevices and cracks, and a nightmarish skull fringed with spines, its skin decorated like a Gothic cathedral, burst from the ground and turned warty jaws toward them.

"Left . . . run!" Spock yelled, barely in time.

The rippling mouth opened and belched a second stream of fire. It scorched the sand where they had been standing only seconds before.

Stumbling backward even as they pulled their phasers, they found themselves backed against the steep inward side of the dune. All three weapons fired, aimed to strike the monster in that cavernous mouth. The monster paused, then swung ponderous jaws to face them again.

"The lining inside the mouth of a creature that can spit fire," Spock lectured hurriedly, "would seem to be composed of organic material highly resistant to—"

Without knowing what prompted the thought, Kirk yelled, "Aim for the underside of the neck!"

Once more three beams of intense energy crossed the space between the men and their assailant. All three struck the creature in the area between the lower jaw and forelegs.

Once again the effort seemed futile. Instead of trying to incinerate them this time, the monster lunged forward, jaws agape. It was slow, however, and clumsy. The little group scattered. The primitive machinery of its mind turning slowly, the monster singled out one victim—Kirk. It turned toward him, then rose suddenly on thick hind legs.

Broad spadelike claws on its forelegs reached inward, clawing confusedly at its throat. Then it toppled like a leathery gray iceberg to lie unmoving in the yellow sands.

The impact of the monster's fall had thrown Spock to his knees. Now he glanced around in concern as he slowly got to his feet.

"Captain?"

"Here, Spock," came the reply from nearby. "Are you all right?"

"I am undamaged."

Kirk joined him, brushing the sand from his tunic. "Where's Dr. McCoy?" He looked around, suddenly conscious of the fact that the doctor was nowhere to be seen. "Bones . . . Bones!"

A distant, faintly desperate reply sounded. "I'm . . . *mmpggh!*"

Kirk and Spock turned, looking for the source of that brief cry. There was no sign of Dr. McCoy. Then it sounded again, muffled to the point of unintelligibility.

Worriedly, Kirk glanced to his left, then gestured. "I'm not sure. I think the sound came from back there."

They moved slowly down the length of the unconscious creature's massive body. Spock was the first to notice the two spinelike forms protruding from beneath the thick tail.

"Hang on, Bones," Kirk shouted, "we'll get you out!" The officers moved alongside the two projections, which proceeded to twitch insistently. They shoved, but to no avail. "Again, Spock!"

A second effort, both men straining and heaving, failed to move that limp, incredibly solid bulk. And the shifting sand provided poor footing.

"It would seem," a panting Spock ventured, "that another solution is called for, Captain. We cannot lift the tail. Therefore, we must move the doctor."

Kirk eyed him uncertainly, then nodded in understanding. They dropped to their knees and began digging sand with the speed and efficiency of a pair of small mechanical shovels. The thrashing of the doctor's legs added desperation to their efforts, growing more and more frantic with each passing second.

Finally a lower torso and then a pair of arms became visible. Pulling and additional digging brought the rest of the ship's chief physician into the open once more.

McCoy drew his knees against his chest and locked his arms around them, taking long breaths and digging sand from his eyes, nose, and ears.

Spock and Kirk waited and watched worriedly, until McCoy acknowledged the concern in their eyes. "I'm okay, thanks, but the air was just about gone under there." He glanced back at the sloping pit now leading under the tail. "The flesh was slightly humped above me. I had a small air pocket. Smelly, but I wouldn't have traded it for a bottle of the Federation's finest perfume."

"You're sure you're not hurt?" Kirk pressed.

"No . . . just surprised. I didn't even see the tail falling. It isn't every day a dinosaur falls on you." He sneezed and rubbed his sand-scoured nostrils. "If the ground hereabouts had been hard, I'd be just a smear now. But the sand was deep enough, and soft enough, and I was hit just right for the impact to bury me instead of smash me. I lost a little wind, that's all."

Kirk helped McCoy to his feet, then brushed sand from his hands as he turned his gaze beyond the motionless tail. "How much additional desert do you think we'll have to cross, Mr. Spock?"

The first officer checked his tricorder and pointed in the direction the terse signal had come from. "I have no way of judging for certain, Captain, but, extrapolating from temperature and atmospheric readings, at least several additional kilometers. It could be hundreds."

"No," Kirk objected. "The signal wasn't that strong. But we'd better pick up our pace, regardless. There's no cover here, either from the sun, or from any of the other hungry locals. I'd like to make a bit more progress along the signal track before Scotty beams us aboard for a rest period."

They resumed their march across the sands, detouring around the still-stunned mountain which had almost trapped McCoy. But as soon as they resumed walking, Spock lapsed into an introspective silence which Kirk recognized immediately. Something was troubling the first officer. If Spock had something on his mind, something not yet sorted out, he would inform them about it in his own good time.

His own good time came several dozen meters farther into the dry basin. "You know, Captain," he suddenly murmured, "it was unusual the way I seemed to know, rather than guess, that our phasers would be ineffectual while aimed down the

carnivore's throat. The creature itself . . . did it not seem familiar to you?"

Kirk thought a moment, and found, to his surprise, that he didn't have to search his memory for very long. The familiarity of the monster had bothered him all along, but it took Spock's query to crystallize it.

"Of course . . . I've seen soloids of something just like it on Canopus Three. That's impossible, though. Canopus is many too many parsecs from here." He squinted into the unyielding sunlight.

"True, this desert is very similar to those found on Canopus Three." His voice faded. "Very similar. In fact, those isolated growths, the color of the petrographic outcrops—they're all remarkably alike."

"Are you suggesting, Captain, that a similar environment presupposes identical evolution?"

"My shoes," McCoy broke in, with undisguised distaste, "are full of sand."

Spock's concentration was broken. "Doctor, your lack of scientific interest is a constant astonishment to me."

"I'll be glad to discuss that with you, Spock, the next time you drop into Sick Bay for some medication, or a checkup."

"No need to become belligerent, Doctor. That was merely a simple observation."

"Spock, your simple observations," McCoy rasped as they trudged toward the top of the next dune, "tend to get on my . . ."

He stopped in mid-sentence, mid-thought, to gape at the scene before them. And he was not alone. Spock and Kirk had also come to a momentary mental halt.

Spread out at the base of the dune was a wall of green so lush and colorful in comparison to the dull plain they had just crossed that it was almost painful to look at.

Clusters of thorn-laden trees and broad, thick bushes interwove with taller emergents and exotically contoured growths drooping with strange fruits. Practically at their feet a stream emerged, vanishing in a sharp curve back into the thriving jungle.

There were distant hints of moss and fern forest, of swamp and tropical lowland. They could almost feel the humidity, smell the rankness of rotting vegetation.

For all that, it looked a lot friendlier than the country they had just traversed. "Food and water—anyone would have a better chance of surviving in there than on that frying pan we just crossed" was McCoy's opinion.

Spock wasn't as sure. Turning slowly, he studied the terrain behind them. His gaze lifted to the far dune. Beyond it, he knew, lay a violently active thermal region bordering a vast, steaming lake.

Again he directed his attention to the riotous landscape before them, listened thoughtfully to the soft susurration of small living things picking their cautious way through the undergrowth.

"Does it not strike you as peculiar, Captain, that two—possibly three—radically different ecologies exist literally side by side? Steaming, unstable shoreline, backed by a thin line of desert, and now another extreme change of climate and living things."

"I've seen stranger sights in my travels, Mr. Spock. What are you driving at?"

"Nothing yet, Captain. Simply another observation." His voice trailed off as he glared at the rain forest beneath the dune, taking this perversion of natural law as a personal affront.

Kirk flipped open his communicator again. "I don't plan to do much walking through *that*—not without extra equipment." He directed his words to the tiny pickup.

"Landing party to *Enterprise*." There was a brief pause, rife with static and interference. But the special tight-beam broadcast Scott employed penetrated the mysterious distortion layer in the atmosphere. Kirk heard the chief engineer's reply clearly.

"*Enterprise*, Scott here."

"Any new information, Scotty? We're a little puzzled by what we've found down here."

"We've got plenty of confusing readings here, too, Captain," Scott confessed. "There appears to be a large concentration

of life forms slightly less than a hundred kilometers north-northeast of your present position. How large we can't tell—this blasted distortion effect jumbles every sensor reading we get. I'm informed that it *could* be a city . . . or just a central gathering place for migratory animals. I said our readings were inconclusive.

"That's all so far. Lieutenant Arex is supervising information resolution. He hopes to have a more specific analysis of the data within an hour."

"Very good, Scotty." He muttered to himself, "Northeast." Then, louder, "That's the direction of the signal we received, Mr. Scott."

"I could transport you to the region of life-form concentration, Captain."

"Negative to that, Scotty. We don't know that the missing crew is part of that concentration. They could be anywhere in between, and we can't risk skipping over them. We'll have to do this kilometer by kilometer. Let us know the moment Mr. Arex comes up with a determination of that reading, though. We'll continue in the plotted direction for a while longer. Kirk out."

"Aye, Captain. Engineering out."

Kirk put the communicator away as they carefully picked their way down the dune. They paused at the edge of the jungle, fascinated by the way the rich flora appeared to spring with supernal suddenness from the periphery of bone-dry desert.

"I don't like it, Jim," McCoy finally ventured. "Too many unlikelihoods here. Why only the one short signal? You can argue all you want, but to me that implies something other than mechanical failure."

"I'm not ruling out anything, Bones," Kirk replied slowly. "Their inability to respond further could be due to something we can't imagine. It does prove that at least one member of the survey team is still alive, though. Alive and alert enough to be monitoring an unexpected query."

"Apparently alive, Captain," Spock amended. "The signal could have been sent by other than human hands."

"There's no profit in pessimism, Mr. Spock. For the moment I choose to believe they are alive."

They reached the edge of the stream. McCoy glanced at it briefly before kneeling to satisfy the thirst that had built up in him during the desert crossing.

His hands had barely broken the surface of the water when Spock put a restraining hand on his shoulder. The doctor looked up, puzzled, to see Spock staring at the pool.

"Allow me to test the water first, Dr. McCoy."

McCoy eyed the first officer dubiously, then turned his gaze downward again and stirred the water with a finger. He shrugged. "Go ahead, Spock, but I've analyzed enough water to know a drinkable stream when I see one. You know that, too."

"Nevertheless," Spock insisted. The readjusted tricorder was played over the surface of the rippling brook. Spock concluded the brief survey and studied the subsequent readouts, sending semaphore signals with his eyebrows.

"Well?" an irritated McCoy finally pressed.

"As you surmised, Doctor, the water is certainly drinkable."

McCoy looked satisfied, if still irritated, and bent again to drink.

"However, that is not what prompted my uncertainty," Spock concluded. McCoy looked up at him. "Captain, this water is *too* pure."

McCoy grimaced and scooped up a double handful. He downed it, sipped a second and third, concluding by wiping his parched face with wet hands.

"It tastes just fine to me, Spock."

"Despite that, it is too pure, Doctor," Spock insisted emphatically. "Consider what that means."

Kirk chose his words carefully. "Then what you're saying, Spock, is that it's too good to be true?"

"I would say that evaluation is decidedly understated, Captain." Spock studied the silent wall of green as if it might disgorge a hostile alien horde at any moment.

"Water of this purity flowing freely through thick vegetation growing on loose, loamy soil is not only unnatural, it is

positively illogical. As illogical"—and he made a sweeping gesture with one arm—"as the proximity of such a rain forest as this to the desert we just crossed." He knelt and scooped up a handful of dirt.

"Note the composition and consistency of the ground we are standing on now." He sifted it through his fingers. "Fine sand and well-worn gravel of feldspar, quartz, and mica." He stood and dropped the dirt. "It barely supports a few stunted shrubs."

He took two steps forward. "Suddenly, I am in a region of climactic floral development, standing on soil"—and he kicked at the thick soil—"of self-evident fecundity."

"I'm not sure I follow you, Spock," the captain commented.

His first officer gestured all around. "Don't you see it, Captain, Dr. McCoy? It's the abruptness. There is no blending of jungle into desert, desert into jungle, or desert into thermal lowland. The borders between widely divergent ecologies are as sharp as if they had been drawn with a knife."

"Which means what?" wondered McCoy.

Spock drew himself up, then spoke slowly. "It is my theory that what we have seen and encountered since we've landed has been carefully manufactured and not naturally evolved. Environmental manipulation on a large scale has taken place here."

"Terraforming," McCoy muttered. "Or Vulcanforming, or whatever . . . I see. A process which implies the presence of highly intelligent life forms." Suddenly he found himself staring at the green ramparts with nervous expectancy.

Kirk rubbed at his dry chin. "Reasonable as far as it goes, Mr. Spock. But Terraforming usually follows a consistent pattern." He kicked at the ground, sending yellow sand to stain the dark earth of the forest. "On the strength of your own observations, this hardly seems consistent."

"It does appear to be almost random choice, Captain. Unless, of course, the randomness *is* the pattern."

McCoy sighed resignedly. "Spock, don't you ever say anything straight out?"

Spock turned a blank stare on him. "I thought I just did, Doctor."

"Gentlemen, please," Kirk pleaded, "not now. We have work to do."

A short march parallel to the lush greenery brought them to a path that charged in lazy curves deep into the forest. It might have been worn by the passage of many jungle dwellers . . . or it might have been cut. It was another piece of a puzzle that seemed to be growing more and more complex.

The jungle itself bore one similarity to the desert region they'd crossed—its familiarity. Like the Canopus III desert analog, this jungle possessed an almost recognizable pattern which Kirk struggled to place in his mental catalog of well-known alien environments. But identification of the forest world in question remained just beyond his thoughts.

Kirk studied the fibrous exterior of the large tree ferns they were now passing between. Those striking purple-and-puce convolutions were familiar from a well-studied text. To find the environment of one planet reproduced here was startling enough. To find two in such close proximity to each other held profound implications.

"Spock," he began easily, "what do you think of—"

A violent warning cough sounded in front of them. It was followed by a hoarse roar. One, two, three forms and more appeared on the open trail ahead. The powerful spotted bodies showed bristling dark fur and deep-set, angry eyes.

The pack of doglike creatures remained frozen, obviously startled by the appearance of the three figures. They sported huge curved claws more suited to some clumsy digging creature like a sloth, and long thin fangs. Insectoid antennae projected from the thick ridges of thrusting bone above the eyes.

Those eyes narrowed now, with all the expectancy of an archaeologist coming upon the bust of an emperor instead of yet another pottery shard. Visual evidence of unfriendly intentions seeped from thick-lipped muzzles. The pack began to edge toward the intruders.

With corresponding caution and patience the three men started retreating.

"There was a cave in that cliff face we just passed," Kirk whispered. "It didn't look too deep—but it's bound to be better than standing here in the open. If we can make it . . ."

They picked up their pace slightly, still facing the approaching pack. But, whether through impatience, hunger, or divination of Kirk's intentions, the pack leaders abruptly charged.

"You two, run for it!" Kirk shouted, pulling his phaser and dropping to one knee. "I'll hold them off. They can outflank us all here."

"May I suggest, Captain, that three phasers—"

"Get moving, Mr. Spock!" The first officer hesitated, then turned and ran with McCoy for the cave. His phaser still set to stun, Kirk fired at the nearest of the loathsome apparitions. It yelped once before folding up on the ground.

That was the signal for the rest of the pack to split up. Sinister rustlings and cracklings began to sound on both sides. Kirk fired again, dropping one lean shape that showed against the green on his right. He couldn't hope to get them all—they would come too often from too many directions.

He saw movement out of the corner of an eye and whirled to find Spock and McCoy racing back toward him.

"I thought I told you two to set up your defense in the cave!" he said angrily.

Spock's phaser beam shot past him to knock the legs out from under one of the creatures that had crawled to within jumping distance of the captain. The animal quivered and was still.

"There is a small problem," he explained smoothly.

"A large problem," corrected McCoy, turning to point back the way they had come and simultaneously firing at a low shape.

With Spock and the doctor covering, Kirk was able to divert his attention long enough to peer back down the path through the jungle. From here the cave entrance was barely visible, a dark shadow beneath the looming, fern-studded cliff.

Something was coming out of that cave.

It slid sinuously along the soft soil, emerging from the recesses of the cave like a worm from an apple. It was massive, reptilian, and two-headed. Further description called for extreme adjectives Kirk had no time to dwell on.

"Stay together—and keep backing up toward it," he ordered tightly.

"Jim . . .!" McCoy started to protest.

"No time to argue, Bones—do it!"

McCoy looked anxious but took up a position alongside the captain. Spock was already firing from his other side. As the pack started to emerge from the forest, the officers kept retreating toward the cave—and toward the horror that was coming out to meet them . . .

II

It reached the point where McCoy decided he would rather turn his phaser on himself. "Jim . . . we can't keep . . ."

He didn't even have time to argue any more, so tight had the pack closed in. Not only that, but it turned out that the resistance of the doglike creatures to the phaser beams was considerable. The beams knocked them out, but those first stunned were back on their feet again and once more closing in for the kill.

"When I yell," Kirk ordered, "cut your phasers and dive for that thick copse over there."

McCoy looked in the indicated direction, but saw only a large clump of high grass too thin to keep out a determined mouse, much less a mass of bloodthirsty beasts.

And Spock nodded, apparently concurring in this madness!

The pack was nearly on them now. It had become so bad that McCoy almost beamed Kirk in taking one of the monsters before it could sink scimitarlike fangs into the captain's right shoulder.

At that point, Kirk shouted, "*Now!*" and plunged headfirst toward the high brush. Spock sprayed the pack with a last sustained burst of phaser fire and joined him. Both were a step behind McCoy.

The pack leaders sprang ahead. That concerted action drew the undivided attention of the oncoming leviathan. Its foremost segments expanded. The driving head opened to seize the nearest pack member in one set of jaws.

The quasi-canine screamed, twisted, snapping uselessly at the armored skull. Its fellows, their memories extending only to the immediate prey, forgot their smaller quarry to attack the flanks of the snake-thing.

Two sets of long fangs cut and stabbed at the iridescent yellow and green body. Pained, the Janus-snake twitched convulsively, pure muscle sending the two attackers flying into oblivion among the surrounding trees.

Less-bloodied eyes watched from the safety of the neutral grass.

"Stay low and slow," Kirk urged his companions, "and let's edge around behind this."

Nothing challenged them, and they reached the head of the path, the point where the pack had emerged, without incident. They kept to the bordering brush for another thousand meters, though, despite the fact that the pack's attention was occupied elsewhere. Like all creatures of limited intelligence, the dog-beasts' span of attention was brief and easily diverted. There was no point in drawing unnecessary attention to their retreat.

Behind them, the monster reptile snapped and coiled about the harrying pack . . . a colossus assailed by hornets.

"I begin to understand the difficulties even an experienced survey team might encounter here." Spock breathed evenly as they jogged down the path, now well away from the bloody clearing.

"I don't see how anyone could survive on the surface of this world for six weeks, cut off from a base ship and outside support," puffed McCoy.

Kirk observed sharply, "Don't prejudge them, Bones—we're still alive, aren't we?"

"That's true, Captain," Spock observed, slowing, his gaze focused on something high up and ahead of them. "However, it is arguable if this can be called surviving." He gestured at the cause of his comment.

"I wonder if hunting is merely bad hereabouts, or if we constitute some sort of edible novelty to the local fauna."

Through the gap in the trees ahead, Kirk could see three narrow-bodied winged horrors heading straight at them in a long, gliding dive. They shared some of the characteristics of both the pack and the two-headed snake-thing. They had reptilian snouts and scaly wings, but the lithe bodies were coated with fur, and they didn't have the cold eyes of the unblinking reptile.

"Keep your phasers on stun, but be prepared to shift to a stronger beam if necessary," ordered Kirk—rather tiredly, McCoy thought.

McCoy was right. Kirk had had about enough of this world's unrelenting attacks. In light of the steady assault, the Federation edicts forbidding the avoidable destruction of alien life were beginning to grate a bit.

Once more the three officers assumed firing position, once again triple poles of light crossed open air. And the winged dragon-shapes continued their confident dive right toward them.

"Useless!" yelped McCoy, his fingers moving to adjust the setting on his weapon.

"Steady, Bones," urged Kirk. "These are just like the dargoneers on Maraville—the stun charge will get to them eventually."

"Before they get to us?" McCoy murmured, his finger moving back from the setting wheel. He held down the trigger of his phaser, as the flying reptiles continued to come nearer and nearer.

Then a most peculiar thing happened.

The dargoneers jerked up in midair, their heads snapping up and back and their wings abruptly beating unsteadily at the air. Ignoring the continued beaming, they seemed to get control of themselves one by one, turned, and flew off in separate directions.

With nothing left to beam, McCoy clicked off his phaser. Lower jaw hanging open, he stared at the spot in the sky where the seemingly unstoppable aerial meat-eaters had come up short.

"Now that," he observed bemusedly, "is more than passing strange."

"An invisible force field, Doctor," Spock observed. "The knife I was talking about before." He turned to look at Kirk. "I think if we attempt to return the way we've come, Captain, we will find similar fields separating the three environments we have thus far encountered. They were absent when we landed but have apparently been restored."

"Plausible enough, Spock," replied a worried Kirk. "But why shut down such fields in the first place?"

"I cannot imagine, Captain. To find out, I believe we must locate those who have created the fields in question, as well

as transformed this section of the planet into a multitude of adjoining alien environments."

"That implies—" Kirk began, but something cut off his breath. He had the sensation of being lifted clear off the ground, experienced that peculiar sense of helplessness one has when one's feet no longer have contact with anything solid. It was a common enough experience in free-fall space, but highly disconcerting on solid ground.

He felt something like a metal band fastened around his waist. When he looked down he saw a gray, wide coil tight around his middle. It didn't look like metal. He put both hands against it and shoved.

It didn't feel like metal, either.

Then he turned and looked behind him and saw what had picked him up as neatly as an elephant plucks a lone peanut. He was in the grasp of the tail end—he supposed it could as easily be the front end—of a creature some six or seven meters in length. It was built low to the ground and had no visible external features. No eyes, mouth, head, arms, or legs —nothing save this single flexible tail or tentacle.

It looked very much like a common garden slug, yet it wasn't ugly. The aura of intelligence, of purposeful, controlled power that Kirk sensed, removed any twinge of xenophobia he might have felt at the mere sight of it.

The creature started to move off down a partially concealed path. Kirk tried to observe its method of locomotion and found he couldn't see beneath its slightly horny, skirtlike lower edge. Whether on legs, cilia, horny plates, or something unimaginable, the creature moved smoothly across sometimes uneven terrain.

At the moment Kirk was more interested in the front end of the creature, for he had to assume it was traveling headfirst. That end showed a single tubular mouth that seemed to study him at length before turning back ahead. Although unable to slip free, he discovered he could turn his upper body easily enough. Looking back, he saw McCoy and Spock following, each similarly pinioned in the grip of one of the dull-hued creatures.

The limb that held him terminated in several smaller divisions, which were in turn separated into still smaller wiggling filaments. The flexibility of those digits was promptly demonstrated when he tried to reach his phaser. One curled around it and plucked it from his waist.

He managed to pull his communicator clear, but that surprisingly delicate organ circled another part of itself around the compact instrument and tugged it firmly from his hand. The action was irresistible without being crudely violent. Whatever had control of him, then, was interested in keeping him intact and reasonably healthy.

That knowledge, along with the fact that no attempt was made to draw him closer to that strange tubed mouth, enabled Kirk to relax ever so slightly.

As soon as the path opened into a cleared, well-kept trail, the three slugs accelerated astonishingly. Their lower limbs might be hidden, but they were amazingly efficient. And despite the speed, the tail-tentacle held Kirk firmly enough so that the ride was not as bumpy as he had feared.

"Would . . . would you say this is an intelligent life form, Mr. Spock?" he called long minutes later, his initial evaluation of their captors complete.

"It is difficult to say for certain at this time, Captain," Spock called from behind. "Thus far their only action that could be construed as intelligently formulated was the removal of our phasers and communicators. That could be an acquired or taught action, however. They may be more than advanced domestic animals."

As Kirk considered this, he noticed the squarish shape still slung over the first officer's shoulder. "Intelligent or not, they forgot something, Spock. Can you get at your tricorder?"

"I think so, Captain." One arm was pinned firmly to his side, but he still managed to work the other around enough to fumble at the compact instrument's controls. It was hard to adjust the sensors with only one hand. If he could retain control long enough to take even a few preliminary readings, it might tell them a great deal about—

Two protrusions of the multilimbed tail plucked the tricorder neatly from his shoulder.

"I believe I have an answer, Captain, to the basic question. If these are merely trained animals, their attention span and selectivity are extraordinary. Consequently, even if they are not the masters of this world, I think it reasonable to say they can be considered intelligent on their own."

"Personally I could do with a few more answers than that," a discouraged, aching McCoy called from the back of the strange column. "We've been traveling like this for what feels like hours. Where are they taking us?"

"As near as I can tell, Bones, we're moving northeast, in the approximate direction of that life-form concentration Mr. Scott reported on." His expression turned wry. "It would be a help if he had clarified just what that concentration is, and could let us know. We'd have some idea of what we're heading into."

"I think it more likely, Captain, that we will be able to identify it for Mr. Scott." He gestured with his free hand. "Look ahead."

Kirk turned his attention forward again. They were just coming to the crest of a hill, and he had a glimpse of something distant and pale through the green mesh.

Then they were over the steep slope and traveling down on the opposite side, their peculiar captors never slackening the pace.

The city spread out before them, marching in neat ranks of low, blocklike buildings to the distant horizon. It was an urban complex laid out close to the ground, rather than high and skyward as many of the great Federation centers were. The only interruptions in the field of gently rounded structures were provided by glistening bodies of water, pools, and streams—and by an alien-conceived yet still attractive landscaping. It was not a place Kirk would have liked to live in, but that didn't prevent him from admiring its unmistakable, utilitarian beauty.

"Quite a metropolis," he finally murmured. Spock concurred fully.

"If these are the builders and not servants, they are capable of admirable feats of construction."

"I'm thrilled you two can admire the local talent," McCoy commented sardonically, "but I still have this sick feeling that

we're about to become someone's lunch."

Spock looked indifferently confident. "For a creature of this size, Doctor, you would hardly be more than an appetizer."

"Now there's a comforting thought!" McCoy snorted. "Not only am I going to be eaten, but even my passing'll rate hardly a burp."

"We're slowing down," Kirk noticed.

They had come up against the base of yet another hill. Since it was no steeper than the one they had just crossed, Kirk wondered at the stop. Then he noticed that the creature holding Spock had moved to the hill-face and was doing something to a section of the ground.

His guess was confirmed as the reason for their halt became obvious. There was a muted hum from somewhere ahead as the hillside, complete with vegetation and rocky outcroppings, began to slide upward into a concealed recess.

Behind it a large, well-lit cavern appeared, dominated by a huge, silvery cylindrical form which threw back the morning sun in a way only highly machined metal can.

They started forward again. When they neared the cylinder, Kirk thought it was suspended freely in midair. As they moved closer, though, he could see dust motes floating in the air around the base of the metal construct. It was riding on a cushion of air—or something more advanced and less identifiable.

They entered the cylinder through an oval opening in its side. Kirk wondered if their captors also traveled on a cushion of air. That would explain the lack of visible limbs. Come to think of it, this cylinder bore some resemblance to the Lactrans' own bodies.

It grew dark as the humming hillside behind them slid back into place, but only for a moment. Some hidden device compensated, and the interior light grew correspondingly brighter. Kirk tried to identify the source of illumination, but without success. The interior of the cylinder showed nothing like a window, fluorescent panel, concealed tube light, or anything else recognizable as a light source. There was only the smooth metal, his companions, and their three enigmatic, silent captors.

"They're undoubtedly taking us to that city," he ventured aloud, as the faintest hint of motion jarred the craft. "If we could manage to communicate with some of their leaders . . ."

"They don't seem very interested in communication with us," McCoy noted curtly, staring down at the dull gray back of his alien. "That's assuming they're capable of interspecies communication at all."

"I'd tend to think like that, too, Bones," agreed Kirk, "except every now and then I seem to feel something knocking about the inside of my mind, something that won't stay still long enough for me to fix on it. Like daydreaming. When we reach the city—"

He broke off as the oval portal drew aside with unexpected speed. Their hosts slid through the opening, still showing no strain from their bipedal burdens. At no time, Kirk marveled, had they let their load down to rest.

"We're . . . we're already here?" wondered McCoy, staring in all directions. Spock's amazement was still directed at their means of transportation.

"Remarkable. I experienced none of the sensations of traveling at high speed, yet we have obviously been carried at tremendous velocity. I would very much like a look at the mechanisms involved."

Kirk wasn't listening. His gaze was reserved for the big chamber in which they now found themselves. The vaulted room appeared to be divided into doorless compartments dominated by intricate yet massive machinery. Occasionally, complex structures of metal overhead bathed them in intermittent washes of multicolored light.

A short . . . walk, crawl? He couldn't say, but by some means they entered one such side compartment. The powerful tail-hands dipped, and Kirk, Spock, and McCoy found themselves deposited gently on the ground with as much care as they had been picked up.

That was the one comforting aspect of this entire episode so far. Throughout the entire journey and despite their apparent indifference, the slug-creatures had taken pains to avoid even bruising any of their captives. Nor had they made anything resembling an overtly hostile gesture.

"Any ideas, Doctor?"

"Only one, Jim," replied McCoy, studying their uninspiring, pale-walled alcove, "and it's not very appealing. I'd guess they're doing exactly what we would do in a similar set of circumstances."

"Which is?"

"Well," he continued, as Spock knelt to examine the half-metal, half-porcelain surface they stood on, "if we encountered an alien creature we'd never seen before on a Federation world, one which science records made no mention of, the first thing we'd do is make sure it was free of harmful bacteria, germs, and other assorted little surprises.

"I wouldn't be surprised if those colored beams we passed through had something to do with insuring our hosts' health. That accomplished, we'd next proceed to see if our visitor were intelligent."

"Congratulations, Doctor," Spock said, looking up from his study of the floor. "All most logical assumptions."

"I told you you should drop by the medical lab sometime."

"A more important question, gentlemen," Kirk interrupted, "is whether or not there's a way out of here." He pointed. "As you can see, we've been left alone."

Indeed, there was no sign of their captors. The vast floor of the chamber was deserted.

"Gone off to report our appearance, maybe," Kirk suggested. He started toward the exit and was brought up short by a half-anticipated barrier. The sensation was akin to that of running into a giant sponge.

Reaching out, he slowly tested the apparently normal air before them. It wasn't hard and unyielding as some such barriers were. Instead, he could push into it; but resistance grew stronger and stronger until further progress grew impossible. At that point, exerting additional strength merely caused his probing fingers to slide off in various directions, as though he were pressing on slippery glass.

"Force field, all right," Kirk murmured. "It seems harmless enough. In fact, if it's designed to do anything, it's to keep those inside undamaged if they try to escape. Absorbs impact rather than resisting it bluntly."

"The bars of a cage are just as harmless," McCoy observed pointedly, "unless you're viewing them from the inside. And we are definitely on the inside." He moved up to the force field. "Let's see if this field is impervious to everything." He cupped his hands and shouted.

"Hey, listen, let us out of here . . . we're as curious about you as you are about us, blast it!"

Something tickled his head.

"A wasteful use of energy, Doctor," Spock commented. "I believe they can hear us quite well without your shouting." He eyed them closely. "I received definite hints of thought projections. I understand that humans are not as sensitive, but did either of you experience anything just now?"

Both Kirk and McCoy nodded.

Spock looked satisfied. "I thought I had detected similar impressions earlier, but could not be certain. I am now. Clearly, they are purely telepathic."

Kirk looked puzzled. "We've encountered telepathic races before, Mr. Spock, and had no trouble communicating with them. Why can't we get a grip on any of the local transmissions? I have the feeling I can almost see an image forming in my mind, but it never becomes stronger than 'almost.' "

"Analysis of the impressions I have received thus far, Captain, would appear to indicate that their thoughts move at a rate far beyond our comprehension. We can only grasp at a fleeting image here and there. That fleeting image we barely sense probably represents many complex thoughts elaborated on at length."

"Surely we can communicate with them somehow," Kirk muttered, "even if only through bits and pieces of information."

"I do not know, Captain," a discouraged Spock mused. "The sheer rapidity of their cogitation, the incredible transport system which brought us here, certain aspects of the instrumentation we have already been exposed to—that could be as advanced compared to Federation civilization as we are to a colony of ants. There also remains the possibility that

they could communicate with us and are simply not interested."

"Don't they think we've anything to say?" growled McCoy. "If that's so, they're sadly mistaken. I've got plenty to say to them. Their methods of greeting visitors . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Wait a minute . . . what were they doing out among those other creatures? We never did figure out all those environments."

"You will recall, Doctor," reminded Spock, "that we recognized at least two species from vastly different worlds and ecologies, and we landed in yet another ecology altogether. Remember how we felt that the environments we were passing through appeared not only unrelated to one another but to this world?

"A civilization this advanced might enjoy transforming part of their own planet to"—he hesitated over his choice of terms—"more conveniently provide for their specimens."

"Are you trying to say that we beamed down into some kind of local zoo?"

"That is precisely my theory, Doctor."

"Maybe they'll be kind enough to explain," said Kirk, turning to face the alcove barrier. "They're coming back."

None of them could tell whether the three Lactrans approaching them now were the same three that had brought them there. They inched smoothly across the chamber floor, moving easily via a still unseen, unknown method of transportation, concealed beneath rippling skirts of gray flesh.

Stopping just outside the alcove, the three aliens regarded those within in contemplative silence.

"Examining us," Kirk whispered idly.

"Well, I'm sick of it!" McCoy snorted. He moved up to the force field and gestured emphatically at their captors. "Look, we're as smart as you—maybe a little smarter in some areas—and we don't take kindly to being locked up. I think it's about time you—"

One of the colored beams from above abruptly winked off as the nearest of the three Lactrans reached in with its

manipulative tail member to neatly lift the startled doctor from between his companions.

III

"Wait a minute," McCoy yelled. "Do you—"

His world suddenly turned upside down, and he caught his breath. The slug was turning him slowly in its grip and he found himself facing the floor.

"Hey!" Not caring one bit for the position he found himself in, McCoy struggled violently, beating with both arms at the encircling coil of rubbery flesh. The Lactran took no notice of either the doctor's physical or verbal barrage and continued to examine him as unaffectedly as McCoy would an experimental animal in his lab.

"We've got to communicate with them!" Kirk said tightly.

"By all means, communicate," McCoy mumbled, in no mood for diplomacy. His resistance had faded to an occasional weak blow directed at the clasping coil. "Tell it I'm getting dizzy."

"Try, Spock," urged Kirk. "If we concentrate on the same thought, try to pool our effort . . . Try to think *at* it, tell it to release McCoy and put him—"

They never got the opportunity to try. Kirk's voice and concurrent thoughts were interrupted as the other two Lactrans reached into the alcove, one lifting Kirk and the other Spock. They started toward the far end of the vast chamber.

A large section of the far wall appeared to be constructed of the same silvery material as the transportation cylinder. They paused before it and waited while it slid upward. That action Kirk was prepared for.

What he was not prepared for was the sight on the other side.

He had expected to enter another chamber. Now he blinked as he found himself out in open air and bright sunlight once again, moving rapidly forward.

He glanced down. They were traveling on a moving road or sidewalk of some kind. At the moment it was devoid of any other travelers.

Immense buildings slid past on either side of the roadway. All were constructed of simple gently curved squares and rectangles. There wasn't a single straight line to be seen. Perhaps the Lactrans attached no importance to architecture on merely *efficient* principles.

Kirk realized that the buildings were constructed with the same simpleness and lack of external ornamentation as their hosts.

Despite the oversized proportions of the structures they moved through and the smoothness of the moving roadway, Kirk estimated they had traveled a respectable distance when they finally emerged from the intensively developed area into a vast open plain.

The abruptness of the shift was startling. One minute they were passing through the depths of the monstrous city and the next found themselves in open country.

At least, it *looked* like open country.

Their speed increased. Kirk saw that the broad countryside was actually compartmentalized, divided into sometimes radically varying ecologies. For kilometers it seemed they passed nothing but arboreal creatures—some of the fliers were recognizable, some less so, and a few that utilized exotic methods to defy gravity teased Kirk's curiosity in passing.

Moving beyond, they entered a region of broad fields dotted with trees and flowering shrubs. One such section of grassland proved to be inhabited by a small herd of unicorns, as neat and appealing as if they had just stepped from the pages of an illustrated fairy tale.

"So much for mythology," McCoy commented sadly, as they passed a horned stallion nuzzling its mate.

"Using a nonspecies standard of appreciation, I confess I find them strangely attractive" was Spock's only comment.

"Something even more intriguing coming up, gentlemen," Kirk called to them.

They turned their attention forward, to where the moving roadway executed a sharp turn. At the end of the bend was a new habitat at once more familiar and at the same time more alien than anything they had yet encountered. Three small cottages, as perfect as if they had just been transported

whole from Earth to Vulcan, were grouped neatly to the right of the roadway. Kirk took in the carefully planned details as their speed slowed.

Each house had its own swimming pool, handball court, and other accouterments. The emphasis, he noted, was on providing plenty of opportunity and equipment for physical exercise. Each complex was set in a well-landscaped garden.

Having thoroughly studied the arrangement, the officers were not at all surprised when they stopped next to it. They found themselves deposited on the grass nearest the roadway.

A gentle nudge from one of those incredibly versatile and powerful tails urged Kirk forward. As he couldn't very well resist, he accepted the prod and took a few steps onto the lawn.

"Better to do what they want—for now, anyway," he murmured to the others. "We'll figure this out, given time." He turned, as did Spock and McCoy.

The three Lactrans rested there, just off the roadway, conveying the unmistakable impression of watching without eyes. Kirk, receiving the vague feeling that he was expected to do something, walked directly toward them, slowly. A couple of steps were sufficient to bring him up against the expected resilience of the invisible field.

"Our cage has been resurrected again, Bones." No reply. He turned. "Bones?"

McCoy was absorbed in a detailed examination of the ground, but he glanced up at Kirk's second query. There was a hint of genuine surprise in his tone.

"This is real grass, Jim. Real Earth-type common grass. Real soil, too. Though I wouldn't bet on how deep it goes."

"Exactly," agreed Spock from nearby, where he was engaged in cursory study of a rosebush. "This area has been laboriously prepared for human types."

"How's that again, Spock?" McCoy prompted, struggling to classify what looked like an Earth-type weed.

"We are now apparently exhibits in this zoo."

"Zoo? Exhibits?" McCoy straightened, botany temporarily forgotten. "Well, I'm no exhibit."

"Keeper-animal relationships have always been fluid, Bones," observed Kirk, "even on Earth. We have one category for ourselves and one for most other animals. But then there are the primates and the cetaceans. Intelligent behavior is often a question of artificially applied standards. Maybe the dolphins consider us part of *their* zoo. On this world I think we ought to be flattered if they've put us into the latter category. In any case, they've taken the precaution of putting us behind bars."

"Perhaps we can find out something from our fellow specimens," Spock observed. "I do not believe they could erect this elaborate habitat for us in such an incredibly brief period, despite their technology. They are not gods."

"Fellow specimens?" McCoy echoed in confusion. Then he looked in the direction Spock indicated.

A uniformed man and woman were coming toward them from the farthest of the cottages, walking quickly, the excitement plain on their faces.

"Hello!" the man called as they drew close. "I'm Lieutenant Commander Louis Markel. This is our primary biologist, Lieutenant Randy Bryce. We're darned happy to see you, whoever you are."

"James Kirk, captain of the U.S.S. *Enterprise*. My first officer, Mr. Spock, and chief physician, Dr. McCoy."

"Pleasure beyond words, Captain," Bryce said, her voice high, almost birdlike. "We received your communicator call and acknowledged as best we could."

"Which wasn't as thorough as it should have been," admonished McCoy, taking in their surroundings with a wave of one arm. "Why didn't you warn us, at least to say you'd encountered intelligent life?"

Bryce looked at once resentful and dejected. "We didn't have time to warn you." She sighed. "Every now and then they'll let us have this or that piece of equipment to play with. We can use it, under their special supervision, of course. Our hosts may look clumsy, but they can move with astonishing speed when they want to.

"We're kept under constant mental supervision. There may not be any of them in sight, but you can't escape the feeling of being studied. Everything they give us is operational . . . except our phasers, of course. We never know which bit of equipment they'll give us next, or when they'll take it back. When we think we can conceal our true intentions from them, by thinking nonsense thoughts for a while, we work on ways to produce an effective weapon using cannibalized components from scientific equipment—tricorders and so on.

"We were just lucky enough to have a communicator when your call came in, and we decided to answer immediately. We didn't know if you'd be able to receive us again, or how long they'd let us keep the communicator."

"The reason we replied with a directional distress signal instead of with an elaborate warning," Markel put in, "was because we felt a nonverbal communication had a better chance of being ignored." He shook his head. "These creatures are far too perceptive for that. They knew what we were thinking, despite our best efforts to mask our thoughts. Or perhaps our unconcealable excitement worried them, or made them nervous. Anyhow, the communicator was taken away immediately and deactivated."

"You mentioned, Commander, that they provide you with certain items of scientific equipment from time to time," Spock said. "I could certainly use my tricorder."

Markel shook his head and smiled apologetically. "Not a chance, sir. They're kept on a special exhibit table beyond the force wall. We get awfully nervous when a new bunch of patrons or scientists or whatever our visitors are show up and start playing with them. We don't know if we're ever going to see them again in one piece."

Kirk had scanned the cottages earlier from their position by the roadway. Now he lowered his tone as he spoke to Markel.

"There were six of you on the survey roster."

Bryce swallowed and stared at the unattainable blue sky to their left. "We didn't beam down in time to save the others." Kirk eyed her questioningly, and she shook her head in response to his unasked question.

"No, we don't think the Lactrans had anything to do with it. They've been too solicitous of our own welfare." She looked up at him. "You've encountered some of the other inhabitants of this zoo?"

Kirk nodded slowly.

"Well, the only reason we're alive and here to talk to you now is because the Lactrans got to us before some of their exhibits did." She shrugged helplessly. "The others weren't as lucky."

"Or unlucky," Markel corrected philosophically, "if you consider our chances of getting out of this place."

"Don't be so pessimistic, Commander," Kirk urged. "Eventually, my people may locate us. Considering the technology we've seen so far, I'm not sure a forcible attempt at rescue would be a wise idea. I'm *hoping* we can find another way out before Engineer Scott becomes impatient with our continued silence."

Markel's expression eloquently indicated how he felt about that possibility.

"There should be one other member of your group, then," commented Spock.

"Oh, Lieutenant Randolph's in the end house," Bryce told them. "She's running a high fever, and we can't seem to bring it down. The Lactrans don't take any notice of our entreaties —shouted, written, or otherwise. I suspect they don't consider her illness severe enough. And while we're well-supplied with food, they give us nothing in the way of medical supplies."

"I'll check her out," McCoy said reassuringly. "It would be ironic if our captors didn't help because they were afraid of wrongly treating a valuable specimen." He looked grim. "Or maybe they're afraid you might try suicide. A quick dose of some medicine could kill you before they could interfere. Has anyone . . .?"

Bryce looked back at him steadily. "I'd be a liar if I said the thought hadn't crossed my mind."

McCoy nodded, his expression carefully neutral. "Maybe I can at least diagnose what's wrong with her, but I can't do anything else. Not without my medical kit."

Kirk spoke to Markel as Lieutenant Bryce led McCoy toward the house the three survivors had moved into. "What have you learned about the Lactrans, Commander? You've had a lot more time to study them than we have. All we've been able to determine is that they run this zoo, are telepathic, and possess a very high level of technology. How high we've no way of estimating."

Markel looked disappointed. "I'm afraid we haven't learned much we can add to that, sir. It's difficult to study another culture from behind bars. Particularly when you're being studied yourself. We're not fond of the switch. Also, we were captured and brought here at night.

"But we did see enough to know that this zoo"—and he made encompassing motions with both hands—"is so enormous as to be unbelievable. The only boundaries we saw before we were brought to this place were manufactured ones. There's plenty to hint that the majority of the city is built underground."

Spock made a Vulcan sound indicative of surprise.

"That implies a metropolis of truly gargantuan extent, Commander Markel. On what do you base such an assumption?"

"On what we saw before we were brought here, and on the fact that despite these creatures being obviously diurnal, there were many days when we traveled through the city without seeing a single one besides our hosts."

"And I don't see any now," admitted Kirk, looking around. "That means that if we could slip clear of this force field, we'd have a certain amount of freedom and a good chance of regaining our communicators and phasers. That's a considerable 'if,' however. Have you made any attempts to escape?"

Markel made a muffled sound. "Oh sure." He scooped up a handful of pebbles and spoke as he chucked them into the air. They traveled only a short distance before coming up against the force field and dropping vertically to the ground. "A dozen different ways, a few of them bordering on the insane.

"For example, we tried using one of our communicators, when they allowed us one, to cause a disruption in the field.

You can imagine how well we did with that one. We tried the inevitable tunnel." He half smiled, but there was bitterness in it. "I suppose we ought to have guessed that wouldn't work when they permitted us to continue. We couldn't very well hide the work.

"The force wall extends as far below the surface as you're willing to dig. Then we all tried going on a hunger strike. All that brought about was a steady change in our meals. There was nothing to indicate that the Lactrans regarded it as anything like a voluntary protest by intelligent beings. We decided to give it up before we actually starved to death." He threw the final pebble, hard. "Nothing worked. I think we were getting a little crazy when we received your broadcast."

"Have you tried to communicate?" wondered Spock.

"Naturally, sir. Constantly, endlessly. We've tried talking to them, writing, thinking at them, rearranging the landscaping—everything. As far as we can tell, the only response we've been able to generate with our combined efforts is an occasional peculiar quivering movement on the front part of their bodies. I'm afraid I'm not much on quiver semantics."

"They seem motionless enough now," Kirk informed them, nodding toward the roadway. "It looks like we've got company again, gentlemen."

They turned to face the near section of field wall. Two Lactrans were approaching with that by now familiar eerie smoothness. They settled themselves opposite the captives and succeeded in conveying the impression of lavishing their undivided eyeless attention on the tiny group of bipeds.

It produced, Kirk decided, a very cold feeling.

Since the Lactrans appeared content to rest and watch, Kirk and the others decided to use the opportunity to study their captors in turn. They strolled over and stood at the edge of the force field.

"They built this sealed environment for us shortly after we were captured," Markel murmured. "Fairly sprang up around us. That was one of the first solid indications we had that they were telepathic." He stared at the nearest alien, striving to penetrate whatever shield blocked the mind contained within that sluglike mass of protoplasm. "None of us was thinking

consciously of anything like this layout," the commander continued, "when we were deposited here. Our thoughts were about as far from comfortable cottages and swimming pools as possible."

"That would appear to indicate that they are capable of reaching into one's mind and withdrawing imagery from memory," Spock suggested. Markel nodded agreement.

"I'd think that would also convince them of our intelligence," Kirk mused. "Still, we haven't even defined our own parameters of intelligence. We've no way of imagining what the standards are in Lactran." He glanced at his first officer.

"You mentioned correctly, Spock, that where mental reception is concerned, you as a Vulcan are more sensitive than the rest of us. That goes for thought projection as well. Try. You may have more luck than Commander Markel and the others."

"I will attempt it, Captain, but I am not optimistic."

Standing still and silent, Spock closed his eyes and drifted rapidly into a trancelike state. Kirk and Markel continually shifted their attention from Spock to the two Lactrans near the field.

Without apparent cause, the front ends of both aliens lifted slightly and twisted, puttylike, toward each other. Whether this action was the result of Spock's efforts was something only the first officer himself could answer.

Spock kept up the effort for several long minutes, then slumped, visibly exhausted by the strain.

"There are the same glimmerings of something supernally intelligent, Captain," he reported slowly. "Far different from anything I've ever encountered before. But again, the rapidity with which they process their thoughts defeats me. I cannot break through on their level. It does not help that they seem to be absorbed in conversation with each other. A two-way effort is required."

"I see. And if one directed its thoughts at you, then it wouldn't matter because it could detect our intelligence on its own." He looked disgusted. "I hate cyclic problems." He brightened.

"Perhaps we'll have more success with a technique I'm sure Commander Markel has tried. A combination of Vulcan thought projection and something graphic. Try writing something, Spock, and concentrating at the same time. Navigational computation, perhaps."

Spock nodded. He broke a suitable dead branch from a nearby tree, then located a patch of ground where the grass cover was nearly nonexistent. The formula he scratched in the bare earth was complex enough to indicate mental powers beyond simple random doodling, yet basic enough to be readily recognizable to any creature with a working knowledge of elementary chemistry. At the same time his eyes glazed over, indicating he was striving to project his thoughts at the watching Lactrans.

This time Kirk noticed a slight shaking, a rippling of the gray mantle that lined the front fringe of both aliens. This was accompanied by coordinated, extensive movements of the tail-tentacle.

"You seem to be getting a response," Kirk murmured with repressed excitement.

Spock stirred, his discomfort apparent even through his muddled voice. "I have . . . have the vague impression that . . . they are laughing at me."

That implied a general conception of what Spock was writing and at the same time contempt—it didn't make sense. It didn't add up.

It was frustrating and infuriating.

"But basic mathematics," Kirk almost shouted, "has been a universal language among every intelligent race the Federation has encountered."

The first officer blinked and left his state of concentration. "That may be the problem, Captain. Our formulations may be too basic, though this equation is far from simple. It is possible that they are so far ahead of us mathematically that my attempt was comparable to a child's futile struggle to make words with letter blocks. Many creatures can scratch out imitative lines analogous to mathematical equations. Talent in mimicry does not imply the power of creative thought."

"Try something else," Kirk ordered irritably.

"Yes, Captain."

Once more the trance of projection, again a new formula etched into the dirt. Kirk anxiously studied the Lactrans for the signs of recognition due their captive's intelligence. That they were paying attention to Spock seemed clear.

There were definite reactions. The quivering increased and spread to other parts of the aliens' bodies. But, wish as he would, Kirk saw no indication of anything like shocked amazement, no sign of an attempt to contact him. Nor was there anything pressing at his mind.

This line of attack was useless. There was no point in tiring his first officer needlessly. "It's no use, Spock, you may as well relax."

Spock tossed the stick away and rubbed with both hands at his forehead and temple, like a runner massaging his thighs after a steeplechase.

"At least we know they are capable of humor," he observed.

Markel was not amused. "We haven't seen anything funny about this so far, Mr. Spock."

Spock replied imperturbably, "Animals in a zoo rarely do."

Kirk broke the rising tension between the two by turning away from the Lactrans and starting toward the occupied cottage.

"Let's join the others. Right now I feel the need for a bit more human company, and a bit less alien." He wasn't sure whether the unbroken, eyeless stares of the Lactrans were making him angry or uneasy, or both.

Letting either emotion overwhelm continued study of their predicament would not bring them closer to a solution, he reminded himself as they entered the house.

The interior was frightening in its cheeriness. Frightening because the creatures that had constructed the wooden chairs, printed the bright wallpaper, were anything but human. Frightening because those paper and chair designs had been drawn unbidden from the minds of unknowing human beings.

A tall, middle-aged woman was lying on the couch beneath the front window. Her expression and pose, even in that

naturally relaxed position, hinted at far more than normal exhaustion. Sweat stood out on her forehead like quicksilver on a plastic sheet.

Lieutenant Bryce stood nearby as Dr. McCoy continued his methodical, patient examination—limb by limb, joint by joint, pressing, feeling, laying on hands because of the absence of instruments of metal and plastic and ceramic. While less accurate, however, those hands were equally sensitive.

Bryce turned at their approach, offering a wan smile.

"Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock." She gestured at the prone form. "Lieutenant Nancy Randolph, our cartographer and navigator."

Randolph managed a grin and limp handshakes all around, but even that slight effort clearly exhausted her. Kirk waited until McCoy had concluded his extensive examination, then drew him off toward the rear of the room.

"How is she, and what's the matter with her?"

"She's not well, Jim. As to what's affected her, it's almost impossible to make anything like an accurate diagnosis without proper instrumentation." He took a deep breath.

"If I had to guess, though, I'd say she's picked up some kind of malarial-type infection from an insect bite. I can't tell for certain, of course, much less prescribe any kind of corrective treatment beyond applying cold compresses in hopes of keeping the fever from rising. Bryce has been doing that anyway." He grunted. "If she's not improving, at least she's not getting any worse. But her body can fight the infection only so long. I've got to have my medikit, Jim! Guesses make lousy medication."

Kirk nodded, then turned to walk back to the large front window. The better to enable them to see out? he wondered—or to allow visitors to see in? Angrily, he shrugged the thought away.

The pair of Lactrans had not moved from their resting place. They stayed there, squatting and staring at the house, only occasionally turning front ends to face each other. Kirk knew they were conversing as surely as if they had been shouting in Federation English.

"We haven't seen another Lactran since we arrived except these two," he declared. "Is this standard procedure,

Commander Markel? Do these two have a function—are they scientists, or what?"

"It's our joint opinion that they're guards, sir," Markel told him. "Or keepers—the terminology depends on your mood of the moment. Sometimes there are three instead of two, but always at least a couple hovering around somewhere, except when large groups of them appear. They're probably there to see we don't damage ourselves, or each other."

McCoy grunted again. "Very thoughtful of them. I suppose we should feel flattered."

"You mentioned regular meals," Kirk went on. "Do they feed you or supply game so you can fend for yourselves?"

Markel shook his head. "They bring us a large case of various edibles once a week. The stuff is funny-looking, but it tastes okay. I think they synthesized our emergency rations." He smiled at a sudden thought. "If I'd known, we would have beamed down with steak and seafood instead of concentrates."

"How do they get it to you?"

"I'm not certain. We've never been able to tell if they shut the force wall down completely or just at the point where the food is sent in."

"The point?" Kirk perked up. "They always bring it to the same place?"

"Always," Bryce admitted, nodding. "Near the display case."

"Display case . . . what display case?"

"Behind this house," she continued. "Commander Markel mentioned the table our equipment was kept on. It's set up there, outside the force wall. They have all our toys in there, our digging stones and pointed sticks. That's only appropriate, isn't it?" She turned a worried, tired gaze down to the feverish navigator. "It's all part of the main exhibit—us."

"Phasers, communicators, medical supplies, tricorders, and packs—everything we brought down with us," Markel finished.

"That means my medikit should be there, too," McCoy surmised. "We've got to get it back somehow."

"Possibly we can persuade them to give it to us, Captain," Spock suggested. "It is certain that they are aware of the

potential of each device. That is shown by their refusal to return the phasers at any time."

"But the medical equipment wouldn't be harmful," McCoy noted. Spock shook his head, once.

"We have already commented on the possibility of voluntary injury to a despondent captive," the first officer commented, ignoring the sensibilities around him in favor of cold reason. "That explains their reluctance to turn such material over to their captives."

"Even at the expense of losing one of those valuable specimens," McCoy snarled, staring helplessly at the recumbent figure of Lieutenant Randolph. His arms were held stiffly at his sides, the hands curled tightly into fists.

"A strong emotional projection, Doctor."

"What of it?" a belligerent McCoy objected.

"Possibly nothing, but continue with it. Reinforce it, concentrate on it to the exclusion of all else."

McCoy started to say something, hesitated, then nodded as understanding of Spock's intention dawned on him. He let the rage and frustration flow freely over him, dwelt masochistically on the image of a twisted, emaciated Randolph writhing on the couch in her death throes. His face contorted and wrinkled, and he fairly vibrated with the tension. McCoy was almost a parody of concentration.

Parody or not, it seemed to have some effect. Spock was staring out the front window as McCoy concentrated. As he watched, one of the two Lactrans abruptly turned and scurried off out of view.

"One of the aliens has just left his companion, Captain," he reported.

"Keep it up, Bones."

"I'm . . . trying, Jim . . ." McCoy's face was a portrait of exaggerated yet honest concern.

"A little bit longer. Give them a chance and we'll see what happens . . ."

They waited. Markel suddenly broke the silence. He was staring out one of the back windows and called excitedly to the others.

"Back here, Captain!"

His concentration broken by the interruption, McCoy turned and left the house through the back door, along with Spock, Markel, and Bryce. They were just in time to see the Lactran who had left, or possibly another one, withdrawing its multiple-ended tail from the force-field boundary. At a corresponding point inside was a pile of exotic but nourishing-looking fruit and vegetables.

"Food—different food, and it's not feeding time," a puzzled Markel observed.

"I think I understand," began Kirk. "They must have sensed Dr. McCoy's projection of want, of need, and interpreted it as a desire for food. The strength of the projection might explain the new offerings. Possibly they feel we require a different diet than you, at least at the beginning of our captivity." He considered the pile of edibles carefully.

"That means that their telepathic sense is less than perfect, or they would have given us the medical supplies. I'm sorry they didn't, but at the same time it would be foolish to say I'm not glad to see a hint or two of imperfection on our captors' part."

"It's nice to have confirmation of that fact, Jim," agreed McCoy tiredly, "but I could have told you that already. And while you might think me a reactionary anthropomorphist, I can also assure you that they're not pretty." He wiped perspiration from his brow. The steady concentration had exhausted him, though in a fashion different from the way such strains affected Spock.

Logic ordered no rest, however, as Spock suggested, "I believe we should all concentrate on the need for Dr. McCoy's medikit, emphasizing our intention to use it only to help preserve one of our members."

Markel shrugged. "Worth a try."

All five of them went silent, some with eyes closed, others staring hard at the slowly retreating Lactran, each using the method which seemed most effective to him.

The subject of this concentration responded with satisfying suddenness. It turned to regard them quietly, then sidled over to the oddly curved display table.

Wavering over the metal, the tail hesitated over several objects before picking up . . . the captain's phaser! For a wild moment Kirk thought that one of their weapons might be returned to them. Similar thoughts occurred to several of the others.

Either because of their thoughts or because of the Lactran's own knowledge, the bulky alien immediately put the weapon down. Kirk cursed himself for giving in so childishly to the offensive image his mind must have conjured up. He resumed concentrating twice as hard on McCoy's medikit.

The Lactran's next choice was more assured. It picked up the necessary container. Handling it as delicately as if it were the prize glass sculpture of a master, it moved toward them and set the kit on the lawn behind the house.

Kirk watched the entire procedure intensely, but there was nothing to indicate any button depressed or lever moved to deactivate that section of the force field.

Still, someone somewhere must have done exactly that. He couldn't believe that the Lactrans possessed the physiological ability to walk through their own restraining field with impunity.

He mused on the problem while the others made a run for the precious medikit, lest the alien change its mind and return to snatch it from them.

"No telling when they'll decide we've had it long enough," Markel explained as they ran toward it. "We've been permitted to keep other equipment anywhere from a few hours to a week."

As McCoy anxiously examined the kit and the others crowded around him, Kirk walked on past to study the section of force wall the Lactran had inserted it through.

"It's all here—no damage and nothing altered," declared McCoy finally. "They haven't removed any of the emergency ampoules, either."

"Unfortunately, nothing's changed here, either," Kirk replied. "The field's back on." He stared outward, looking longingly at the table laden with phasers and other equipment, their own as well as that brought by the survey team.

"So near and yet so far," he murmured sadly.

Behind him, McCoy was heading for the house. "Have to see to my patient," he muttered in satisfaction. Doctor, patient, and medical supplies—the tripartite components of his Aesculapian universe were once more complete.

Kirk watched them walk toward the house. He bestowed a final, concentrated thought on the retreating Lactran, pleading desperately for a simple, harmless toy—his communicator.

The Lactran ignored him completely.

IV

Meanwhile others were striving to pierce the isolation which had swallowed up the captain, first officer, and chief physician of the *Enterprise*.

"Are you raising anything yet?" an anxious Scott inquired of Lieutenant M'ress. He stood near the communications console and stared at the squiggles and lines which appeared on various readouts, in the hope that one of them might spell out an answer in plain English.

No explanation was forthcoming from those dispassionate, uncaring instruments, plain or otherwise.

"Not a thing, sirr," M'ress replied. She had answered the same query from Scott with the same information every five minutes since she had taken over for Lieutenant Uhura.

Scott responded with the same order. "Keep at it. They're down there somewhere."

Furiously, he turned over the same old possibilities in his mind. It was highly unlikely that all three officers had experienced a simultaneous breakdown of their communicators, regardless of what might have happened to those carried down by the survey crew.

That left three possibilities.

One, they were unable to use their communicators, for what reason Scott couldn't imagine. Two, their communicators had been rendered inoperative by outside forces. Three . . .

He refused to consider Three. As long as he denied the possibility, it could never come about.

Scottish reasoning can be notoriously perverse, and this was one instance in which Scott utilized its roundabout methodology to the fullest. Spock could say that Scott thought in pretzels all he wanted to . . . as long as the absurd first officer was all right.

As long, the *Enterprise*'s chief engineer thought furiously, as he was all right . . .

The little knot of humans left McCoy to his doctoring, aware that their presence could only hinder his ministrations. Lieutenant Bryce lingered the longest, but eventually she, too, left the couch and its tired occupant to join the others in gazing out the front window.

Both guards stood, or sat, where one had been moments before. They regarded the inhabitants of the house with identical but featureless stares. The inhabitants stared back with somewhat more animation.

"Let's sum things up, Commander," Kirk started firmly. "Based on everything that's happened to you since you've been trapped on this world, what's your evaluation of the situation?"

Markel considered for a moment and ticked off his observations on the fingers of one hand. "The Lactrans treat us quite well. They want us alive and healthy and are willing to go to some inconvenience to insure that we remain so . . . though they do make occasional mistakes—underestimating the severity of Lieutenant Randolph's condition, for example. Most importantly, they want to keep us right where we are."

"A natural reaction for the curators of a zoo," Spock observed drily.

"We've managed to keep from going crazy," continued Markel, "only just. Part of the time we make studious analyses of our guards, trying to discern differences between them . . . with little result. The rest of the time we occupy by plotting absurd escape schemes and executing them, and by making observations of this world not connected with our captors. For example, we've worked out a calendar according to the movements of the Lactran sun and moon. It's a close duplicate of our own, which helps us a little. Oh, and every nine days we draw quite a crowd."

"Undoubtedly the local equivalent of a periodic rest time," commented Spock.

Markel was silent for a while as attention was divided between the guards and the couch, where McCoy made steady, assured motions with his hands and paraphernalia. Then he turned a concerned, unwinking gaze on Kirk.

"Sir, do you think there's any chance of getting out?" It wasn't the sort of statement the leader of a survey crew ought to make, but then, Markel didn't feel much like a leader at the moment. He felt like a laboratory rat crouched at the far corner of its cage, regarding a monstrous hand moving inexorably toward it.

"As long as they keep us alive, there's a chance," Kirk replied, properly encouraging. His private thoughts went unvoiced. "Sometimes the strongest force fields can be negated by the simplest procedures. Tonight we'll try to find a frequency commonality using Dr. McCoy's instrumentation, slightly rearranged, of course."

"I'd say there was no commonality, Captain."

"Not very encouraging, Mr. Spock."

"I am not one for fanciful dreams, sir, as you well know," the first officer replied evenly.

"I never met a Vulcan who was." Markel did not look across at Spock.

"I hope," the target of that barb said carefully, "that was meant to connote the value of being a Vulcan."

"I'm sure it was," Kirk said hastily.

Spock was well in control of himself, but Kirk saw that the survey commander was being pushed by Spock's constant coolness. Spock could only be Spock, however, and he continued relentlessly. His mind could not make room for childishly optimistic speculation where no grounds for such existed.

"I think we should face our situation realistically, Captain. We are specimens in a zoo. We have been taken captive by an alien race of unusual technological accomplishments and unpredictable psychology. To them, we are caged for life. These facts, coupled with the Lactrans' undeniable demonstrations of superior intelligence, do not add up to a very convincing set of factors for eventual escape. And, while not very encouraging, Captain, that is my reasoned assessment of our present situation."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock," Kirk replied. "And mine is, let's sleep on it."

Randolph was a new person the following morning, thanks to McCoy's skilled treatment. New, but not her old self, not yet. Her system would need plenty of time and rest to return to normal strength. So she remained on the couch under doctor's orders as the other five officers left the house.

Kirk was the first one out, and he pulled up short, staring around in surprise. The others followed and displayed varied expressions of equal amazement.

"We seem," Spock observed mildly, "to be drawing quite a crowd."

Indeed, where only the presence of two guards had marred the broad horizon the previous day, there now milled a thickly packed throng of Lactrans. The only visible differences between individuals were slight variations in color and somewhat greater ones in size.

"This is that ninth day I mentioned," Markel informed Kirk, unnecessarily.

"I'll be hanged if I'm going to do tricks for them," grumbled McCoy.

"We can move about as we wish, Doctor," agreed Spock, "but we cannot evade their mental vision. I suggest we attempt to ignore them and make ourselves comfortable."

They moved around to the side of the house, Lieutenant Bryce going inside briefly to inform Randolph of what was going on. The recreational section outside boasted a number of comfortable chairs, and it was into these that the members of the trapped group settled themselves.

Bryce returned, indicating the pool and surrounding equipment. "As you can see, they've given us extensive facilities for enjoying ourselves—and for making sure we stay healthy." She snapped out the words. "A very comfortable wheel, only the rats aren't in the mood to climb in and run in place.

"They feed us," she continued as she relaxed into a free-form of orange plastic, "and apparently think this is all we want. To run, eat, sleep, and"—she paused only slightly —"play."

"Exactly what we would expect from the animals we have in our own zoos," Spock commented. His tone was almost

approving. Almost.

"Well, I am not an animal," McCoy muttered disconsolately.

"Scientifically speaking, we all are," Kirk reminded him, then turned to each in sequence. "Instead of learning about us, a subject we're pretty familiar with, why don't we follow Commander Markel's suggestion and try to learn something about them."

Markel looked resigned. "I don't see what more there is we can learn, Captain, unless we can either penetrate their minds or convince them of our intelligence."

"Known fact: They are purely telepathic," Kirk began, restating the obvious. "Mr. Spock is, like all Vulcans, peripherally so, but as yet has not been able to make successful contact with them."

"Their intelligence is so different that I can find no common basis for an exchange of information, let alone for complicated visualizations," Spock added.

"Exactly what did you learn yesterday?" Markel wondered.

"That the thoughts and expressions of adults are incomprehensible to a six-year-old infant," the first officer declaimed, "and that the infant's babblings are regarded with equal incomprehension by adults." He did not have to place his companions into one of the two categories.

"I think we're missing something, Spock," the doctor said.

The first officer turned an interested gaze on McCoy. "What do you mean?"

"Well, we're assuming this extraordinary, impenetrable intelligence level is uniform throughout the population. In any civilization there are the gifted, the norm, and the slow." He nodded once toward the smoothly shifting crowd. "Maybe there are less highly developed minds out there today. It's only natural to expect the keepers to be reasonably advanced. That's not necessarily so of those who come to gawk. Try them. At least we'll have the general public's impression of us, if we're lucky."

"A fine suggestion, Doctor." Spock turned his stare outward, concentrating without exerting the maximum effort of the previous day.

"It is only a vague generalization," he finally murmured softly. "I could be completely wrong, but we appear to frighten some of them—at least the smaller ones. Probably juveniles. The others have mixed feelings: Some are indifferent, some curious, a few find us rather ugly." He blinked. "It is a sign of their advanced civilization that none projected any hint of antagonism toward us."

"Okay, the feelings are mutual," McCoy commented without rancor. Changing the subject abruptly, he asked Kirk, "What about those on board, Jim?"

"Scotty's patient, Bones, when he has to be. Left to his own feelings, he'd probably have beamed down yesterday to see what happened. But he's under orders. He'll exhaust every ounce of patience, try everything to regain contact with us without taking offensive action. But eventually, he's going to get worried enough to take action.

"As I said before, the *Enterprise* might not come out on top in a fight with our silent hosts. No, Scotty will hold off. He'll need some proof we're in danger before sending down an armed force—and we're probably safer here than on board the ship, thanks to the concern of the Lactrans."

"We have to do *something*, then," McCoy exploded, "besides rest on our fundaments and juggle the odds of a Federation-Lactran battle . . . with us in the middle."

"I have a suggestion, Captain, when the doctor is finished."

McCoy threw Spock a sour look and mumbled, "I'm finished, Spock, what's your grand solution?"

"Not solution . . . suggestion," Spock corrected efficiently, completely missing McCoy's sarcasm. "Evidently they can pick up our thought patterns if we all concentrate on the same thing. *If* they care to go to the trouble."

"This is the main problem. Believing that we are animals, it is therefore not worth their effort to descend to our level. Who cares what the vermin think?"

"Yes, yes," Kirk agreed rapidly, "we've already proven that by getting them to give us the medical kit. Where do we go from here?"

"I see no reason not to try an idea that has worked once a second time." The others eyed Spock expectantly. "One of us

must pretend to be seriously ill. Even more important, the rest of us must *believe* in the falsified illness, so that our true intentions are masked from the Lactrans. The lie must be close to the truth, for us to have a chance. Our captors are perceptive and react quickly. We have to concentrate strongly on the thought that a communicator is vital to the patient's recovery.

"Naturally, we need not specify in our minds exactly *why* a communicator is required, but it is a thought all of us should be able to hold to." He paused, then went on easily, "Surely a return to the *Enterprise* would be one method of seeing to the health of an ill individual."

"Sounds possible, Spock," Kirk finally concurred. "Let's try it. And, visual stimulus being an aid to concentration, let's move back behind the house so that we can look at the communicators while we're concentrating on one."

There were far fewer Lactrans clustered at the rear of the cottage than they had encountered out front. That was only natural, Spock pointed out, since the best view in any zoo was in front of the cage. Possibly their novelty was wearing off, because no rush of Lactrans appeared to gaze at them from the new vantage point.

Only a small number were clustered by the display table. As they neared the field wall, Kirk saw that one of the smaller aliens was busily engaged in examining the equipment laid out on the table. The larger ones rested nearby, apparently deep in telepathic conversation.

"Okay, who's our candidate for convincing convulsions?" McCoy wondered aloud.

"I'll do it," Kirk said immediately. "I'm sick of this place and sick of our situation, so I won't have to exaggerate too much. The rest of you concentrate like hell on the nearest communicator."

"Maybe we'll get lucky," Markel observed, his attention focused on the display table. "That's a little one pretty much alone with the instruments. If Mr. Spock's right, it could be a youngster."

"Spock wasn't sure, Commander," Kirk reminded him. "It might merely be a small adult. Or maybe the adults are the

smaller of the species." Markel looked disappointed.

"Try to think about Captain Kirk's visible manifestations of illness," Spock advised the others, "instead of considering his actual condition. We must strive to project an aura of intense worry and concern, to the exclusion of all other thoughts."

"And remember, we have to be quick," Kirk admonished. "As soon as I get my hands on a communicator, I'll try to get enough information through to whoever answers so that they'll know we require an immediate beam-aboard." He settled himself close to the field wall.

"Ready now . . ."

Kirk became a dervish, spinning, whirling, hopping about, clutching at his head, and finally bending over with both hands pressed to his stomach. He rolled on the ground, bugging his eyes and choking, generally presenting the appearance of a being whose health was somewhat less than ideal.

The others moved to form a half circle around him, leaving the section between Kirk and the force field unblocked. They stared down at the body in spasms, their faces reflecting the agony they forced themselves to feel.

The effect upon the small Lactran studying their equipment was immediate. It turned its front end toward the enclosure and gave that eerie impression of ogling without optics. Moments came and went, while Kirk struggled to maintain the illusion of impending death and Spock wondered if they were wasting their time.

The versatile tail drifted over the exhibit table, finally settling on some of the survey team's emergency medical supplies. Turning sideways, the Lactran extended its tail and deposited the sealed containers inside the field, close to Kirk's thrashing legs.

"It has the idea," Spock murmured, his eyes never straying from Kirk's writhing form. "We must concentrate harder on the necessary remedy. The communicator . . . it is the only thing that will save the captain. The only thing . . . he'll die horribly without it, remember. That's all you can think about, the captain dying . . . unless . . . he gets . . . the communicator . . ."

Several minutes of truly inspired gesticulating on Kirk's part coupled with his companions' shunning of the proffered medical supplies, prompted the Lactran to reach farther into the field cage to nudge the containers closer to the pitiful, suffering specimen.

When this further offering was also ignored, the slug turned back to the exhibits. This time it picked up one of the communicators, the compact device looking even tinier in the grip of that massive gray limb.

But the ruse was only partly successful. Either the Lactran suspected the depth of their need for this particular instrument, or else it was unsure of itself, but, whatever the reason, it decided to keep a close eye on its utilization. So instead of handing over the communicator, it entered the enclosure with it.

Like an elastic crane the tail swooped around and down, to offer the instrument to Kirk. Apparently the Lactrans held to the "heal thyself" principle. Well, Kirk was more than willing to abide by it. He raised a quivering, feeble hand and grasped it, bringing the instrument down toward his mouth. As soon as he had it opened and activated, he underwent a remarkable transition. In fact, his symptoms of advanced disease vanished as though they had never existed.

"*Enterprise*, *Enterprise*, this is the captain. Beam us aboard immediately, all of—"

The communicator was torn from his grip before he could finish. Had he not let go, the Lactran would have taken his arm along with the instrument.

Whether it was the physical or mental commotion, or both, something finally caused the two large Lactrans standing nearest the exhibit table to cease their inaudible conversation and whirl. They started toward the force field.

A familiar flickering in the air had commenced behind the force wall, a colorful shimmering that Kirk gaped at in horror. The transporter effect was not engulfing himself, Spock, or any of the other anxious captives.

The smaller Lactran brightened once and was gone.

Scott fought the transporter controls, having reacted instantly to Kirk's shipwide call. He had focused on the area surrounding the exact position of the communicator, as pinpointed by the *Enterprise*'s communications computer.

Readouts indicated he had locked onto a substantial mass—presumably the captain and the rest of the landing party, including any survivors from the *Ariel*.

He stared expectantly at the alcove, where something was beginning to take shape.

"Captain," he began, "for a minute we thought sure . . ." He stared, swallowed. "What in cosmos . . .?"

Instead of the captain, Mr. Spock, or anyone else, a two-and-a-half-meter-long monstrosity was coalescing in the chamber. It looked like a cross between a cucumber and a squid, combining the least desirable features of both.

Its front end—or was it the back?—moped around rapidly, until it was pointed at Scott. The engineer's hackles rose as he felt as if something unclean were picking at his mind. At the same time the long tail whipped around, secondary limbs contracting.

Scott ducked down behind the console. The tentacle probed. As it did so the *Enterprise*'s chief engineer made like a foot soldier and scuttled fast for the door.

A first palm thrust sent the metal partition sliding shut behind him. A second activated the wall intercom.

"Scott here . . . Security, full team to the Main Transporter Room, on the double! We've—" Metal groaned behind him.

The door had begun to buckle inward. It was still bending when three security guards skidded around the corridor corner, phasers held at the ready.

"I beamed up something out of a bad hangover," Scott yelled at them. "The captain sent an emergency message, and instead of him we got—"

The door gave in with a musical *spannggg*, and Scott's half-coherent explanation went no further.

"Watch it!" he yelled, stumbling backward.

The door slammed down against the deck. Scott thought of yelling for phasers to be set on stun, but changed his mind

when he remembered through the confusion of the moment that security phasers were never preset to deliver a lethal charge.

Nor was it necessary to give an order to fire. Faced with an eight-foot-long slug emerging from behind a crumpled door and a wildly gesturing officer, they decided unanimously to try nonverbal means of persuasion on the apparent cause of the trouble.

Three phasers fired, three beams struck the Lactran. Its skin seemed to ripple slightly . . . and that was all. But the creature stopped, though both Scott and the security personnel had a feeling it wasn't because of the phaser attack.

Scott began retreating down the corridor to organize a larger capture party, but immediately came to a jerking halt as though an invisible cable around his head had snapped taut. Both hands went to his suddenly throbbing skull, where tiny gnomes had set up a small warp-engine and were running it at overdrive.

All three guards, being closer to the intense mental blast, had been knocked to the floor. Sliding along the deck like a heavy metal ingot on oil, the invader sprinted forward, swept up Scott with its tail, and raced down the corridor.

Behind, the guards struggled to find their phasers, their composure, and the tops of their skulls . . .

V

Far, far below, the situation was no less tense, if somewhat less hectic.

"Captain, I believe that for the first time they are making an effort to transmit a comprehensible thought pattern toward us," Spock told them. "Our speculation as to the relationship between age and size appears to have been correct. They are worried about their child, the one caught in the transporter beam.

"These, I gather, are the parents of the missing one. Despite the lack of external sexual characteristics, the standard male-female partnership is in existence here."

"Never mind the biological details, Mr. Spock," a tense Kirk ordered, eyeing the two silent Lactrans warily. "While they're worried about their offspring, I'm more concerned about what it might do to the *Enterprise*. Even an adolescent probably possesses considerable mental as well as physical powers."

"What in Carrel's scalpel went wrong, though?" a bemused McCoy wondered.

"I'm not sure, Bones. Obviously Scotty received our call for help, a call that was sorely lacking in details. That thing snatched the communicator before I could give him any details. As soon as the alien took the communicator from me, well, it was still activated when it was grabbed away. Scotty centered on it, of course."

Spock was swaying slightly, drifting deeper into trance. "They seem to think you made the child disappear," he murmured, "since you were the one who operated the device. Their reaction . . . their reaction . . ."

"Go on, Spock."

"They are surprised, and concerned. The concern is for their missing offspring. They are surprised because we had not been classed as either an intelligent or a dangerous species. And they are somewhat shocked to discover that we may be both."

"We can't stand here," McCoy said nervously, "we've got to do something . . . or they will."

Kirk tried to calm the jittery McCoy. In fact, everyone appeared increasingly nervous. That could only make the Lactrans worry more about their child.

"Calm down . . . all of you. Let's not give our captors cause for concern. The best thing we can do is—"

He doubled over and fell to the ground, twisting in pain—and this time he wasn't acting.

"Jim!" McCoy was at his side, feeling helpless. "What is it?"

"My head! Inside . . . my head." The words came out with an effort. "I think . . . the baby. What happened to the baby?"

There was an odd, hollow tone in those last words, as if something unhuman was trying to operate a human voice mechanism.

"Fight it, Captain," Spock urged, "fight it as hard as you can. Don't try to listen, don't try to let them use you." He turned to McCoy.

"They think so fast, their patterns of cogitation are so complicated, that their own thoughts are too complex for a human brain to assimilate." He watched as Kirk rolled to his knees, tried to keep his balance, and failed.

"If he gives up, even for a moment," Spock explained with deathly precision, "he may go mad. The Lactran thought processes will overload his neural capacity."

M'ress uttered a sound halfway between a screech and a feline yowl as the Lactran, still holding Scott firmly in its grasp, charged out of the turbolift onto the bridge. Arex rose from his position at the navigation console, but despite the shock and consternation, no one moved to abandon his post, no one ran for an exit.

And that was the last thing Scott wanted, since the presence of others seemed to make his captor nervous. The chief engineer had been treated to one of the slug-thing's mental assaults and had no desire to endure another.

"Everyone clear out," he ordered, seeing that no one was going to budge without being told to do so. "Don't antagonize

it."

"Antagonize what?" M'ress asked quietly, bearing Scott's admonition in mind. "What *is* that thing?"

"I don't know . . . yet. But it hasn't injured anyone badly . . . yet. And I have the impression it doesn't want to. It could have sent pieces of me all over the ship by now but hasn't taken that option." The Lactran headed toward the center of the bridge. As it began to move, the bridge personnel started to edge around toward the turbolift doors.

"All rright, what do you want us to do, sirr?" M'ress queried, standing by the open doors.

"Just leave quietly, lassie. Report to Lieutenant Seelens, tell her to set up security teams on all transporters. I don't expect any more visitors, but I want to be ready to greet them in case I'm wrong."

"Yes, sirr," she acknowledged. "But what arre you going to do, sirr?"

Scott let out a resigned sigh. "What do you think, Lieutenant? Whatever it wants me to."

M'ress filed into the lift behind Arex, turned, and started to say something. The closing doors cut her off soundlessly.

He was alone on the bridge with the alien invader.

The front end of the creature waved back and forth, like an elephant sensing the air. It slid forward and placed Scott in the command chair—gently and right-side up, the chief noted with thanks—and then turned its featureless front to stare at him.

"Now look," Scott began, "supposin' you and I talk this over?"

No response from the slug.

"You can talk, can't you?"

Silence, and that continuing eyeless gaze.

"If you can't talk, how do you communicate?" He tried Federation sign language. "Well, what can you do?"

The creature turned and began examining the control consoles nearby, beginning with navigation and working its way around to Spock's library-computer station. The tail end touched several switches, and the multiple screens at the

station lit and began pouring forth a torrent of information. Scott couldn't even identify the sections the creature was studying, much less follow its progress.

"Listen, you've got to be careful here," he explained patiently. "This is the control room of a—hey!"

The tail had reached out and lifted him again, then replaced him in the chair. If this was the alien's method of indicating one should be silent, it failed to impress Scott. The chief was growing increasingly nervous as the alien continued to touch this or that control.

"Now, look," he began as the Lactran switched off the library and moved around to face the helm and navigation consoles, "just keep your grubby little whatever-it-is off things you don't under . . . *no, don't touch that!*"

Too late. The multitipped tail was moving across the consoles with blurring speed, far too fast for Scott to follow. It touched switches, pushed buttons and levers, activated telltales, and checked readouts, while its front end slowly weaved back and forth from one console to the other.

"Listen," Scott howled desperately, "if you keep that up, you'll send us runnin' off to the back of wherever!"

His attention was diverted by the already altered picture on the main viewscreen. It was anything but reassuring. It showed a rapidly shrinking green and white globe, Lactra VII, become a pinhead circle instead of a screen-filling orb.

Seconds later the warp-drive was engaged. An enraged, horrified Scott could only stare and hurl Highland imprecations at the gray hippo before him. His horror sprang from the knowledge that any idiot could activate the *Enterprise*'s warp-drive engines; but the matter of navigation, of determining where those engines were taking the ship, was a chore for experience and expertise.

And he had the sick feeling that the voiceless mass in front of him had neither.

The two Lactrans abruptly turned from the enclosure to converse with each other. Simultaneously, Kirk's body relaxed. His face was pale and his tunic drenched with perspiration. As

the others watched anxiously, he rolled over, sat up, and let out a long *whoosh* of exhaustion.

"Have they stopped, Jim?" McCoy finally asked, when he felt Kirk had recovered enough to answer. The captain looked like a man who had just come out of an eighteen-hour sleep. "How are you?"

"They've left off . . . for now," Kirk told them. "I think I'm okay, Bones. But I'm tired . . . so tired."

"Understandable," McCoy agreed. "Spock, what do you think of . . . Spock?" McCoy turned, to see Spock staring as if frozen at the pair of concerned Lactrans. He was startled to see three more of the full-sized aliens sidling up to the first two. It seemed the alarm had been raised.

At least, he thought grimly, they had succeeded in getting their captors to notice them.

Spock left his trance and glanced down at Kirk. "I am not certain, Captain, but I believe they have concluded that they cannot break into your mind on an individual or even a dualistic basis. They are surprised."

"Good!" McCoy exclaimed. "Maybe they won't try it again."

Spock turned a somber gaze on him. "On the contrary, Doctor, they are now readying the mental strength of five of their number in a more powerful attempt."

A wild, faintly desperate tone underlined Kirk's reaction. "I can't hold out against that many. It's not possible. I don't know why they stopped the last time. You've no idea, Bones, what it's like." He turned an anxious stare on the gathering of Lactrans.

"I don't know if I'll come out of another attack like that last one, let alone one of more than twice the strength."

"Every one of us must help the captain," Spock instructed. "Concentrate on him, try to become one with him, a part of his mind and thoughts. Perhaps we can create some kind of screen, or at least—"

But Kirk was already on the ground again, spinning in pain and screaming for something to leave him alone.

"It's tearing—!"

Their concern was too great for those surrounding him to erect anything like an effective mental screen, if such a thing were even possible. Kirk rolled about for several minutes until his body quit. He lay still, only a quivering of arms and legs and an occasional jerk of his head indicating that his spread-eagled form was still fighting back.

His continued resistance was as obvious as the fact that he was slowly weakening. More minutes passed. Kirk rolled onto his face, limp as a rag doll now, his form twitching from time to time as if touched by a live cable.

A number of wholly alien feelings were approaching eruption inside the *Enterprise*'s first officer when a familiar and unexpected glow appeared in the air inside the force screen, as if someone were shining a colored light on a rippling sheet of clear silk.

Two figures began to emerge. "The Lactrans are coming into the enclosure," Markel began, "but why in this fashion if —"

He broke off as the shifting hues solidified. One of the two figures was Lactran, all right. But the other . . .

It was a surprise to see the small Lactran reappear, but it was a positive shock to see Chief Engineer Scott held firmly in its tail-grip.

The surprise and shock worked equally on the five Lactrans outside the field. Their concentration was shattered by the appearance of the small one, and the results were immediately apparent as Kirk finally ceased his helpless spasms.

The adolescent put Scott down gently. As soon as the chief had moved off a bit, two of the larger Lactrans—not even Spock could tell if they were the original two—reached in and drew the smaller one outside the boundary of the force screen. Rather roughly, McCoy thought, as he turned his attention back to the still supine Kirk.

The others were already gathered around him. He turned onto his back, and McCoy saw his eyes were glazed. Slowly, he tried to sit up, but nearly collapsed. McCoy bent to help.

"No, I'm all right, I'm okay," he muttered thickly. But he did not reject the support of McCoy's shoulder after he had

struggled to his feet. His eyes were clearing rapidly.

"Whew! I feel like my brain's been pulled through a wringer." He looked around at the assemblage of worried faces. "You've no idea what it's like, Scotty." He blinked. "Scotty? What are you doing here?"

The chief jerked his head to indicate the activity behind them. "My alien acquaintance brought me."

Spock looked incredulous, though his words were as evenly modulated as ever. "You succeeded in making contact with it?"

"Not exactly." The object of sudden startled attention grinned. "It made contact with me. I gather it was a tremendous effort for the poor child to slow down to my level."

"You were right, Mr. Spock. Our attempts at communication were properly directed, only at the wrong members of this society."

"What did you learn?" Kirk asked.

The chief engineer considered the question carefully. "Some of it doesn't translate verra easily into human terms," he explained slowly. "But I did succeed in grasping a few definite concepts.

"For one, our small friend is the emotional and physical Lactran equivalent of a human six-year-old. Mentally, however, it is considerably superior to any of us. The first thing it did on appearin' on board was pick the nearest mind for useful information. *Mine!* Then it went on and absorbed all the knowledge in the ship's library computer, science center, and general storage facility. Bein' a curious laddie—or lassie—it decided to play around with its new toys. That included operating the ship's helm. Sent us tearin' right out of orbit."

Kirk, who saw the *Enterprise* gallivanting all over known space at the mercy of a playful alien infant, swallowed hard. "How did you convince it to come back?"

Scott turned introspective. "I think it was my concern for the rest of the crew that persuaded it. That, and the fact that I never showed any hatred toward it." He shrugged. "I suppose any child can tell instinctively when a threat is

present and when it's not. And there was my willingness, the willingness of another, uh, child, to chat with it."

"Infant-to-infant communication," Spock observed, showing no resentment at being likewise classified. "My congratulations, Mr. Scott."

"Anyhow," the chief continued, "I managed to convince it that I wasn't anybody's pet, and that we're no mere grubbers in the dirt. And that it would be a sight better for all concerned if it would bring the ship back into orbit around its own home world. From there, it wasn't too hard to convince it to reenter the transporter so we could return home. By that time the youngster was pretty sure I meant it no harm. What finally reassured it was my readiness to come along too. I think they can sense friendliness in another's thoughts as readily as they can much more complicated concepts. If we could only—"

Spock cut him off softly. "A moment, please, Mr. Scott." The *Enterprise*'s first officer shook his head irritably, like a man trying to throw off the first assault of an advancing migraine. "I believe . . . they are trying to contact us directly. I can . . . make out . . . something. It is very difficult. The adults . . . so concise, so fast in their mental formulations . . .

"They are . . . trying now . . . to slow down for us. Communication involves the insertion of many transitional concepts they have long since discarded as superfluous. The . . . child . . . has explained to them. Adults are attempting to rephrase their normal thoughts into . . . baby talk." The evident irritation and minor pain gradually faded, while his attitude of attentive listening remained unchanged.

"There . . . it's better now. The child has learned much from us, particularly from Mr. Scott. It has also acquired an enormous volume of information about us, and is relaying this to its parents . . . though I can recognize only glimpses and snatches of what it is relating. It is like trying to follow every ripple in a fast-flowing stream." A pause; then: "It has concluded, Captain. Already it has told its parents all about the Federation and the many aspects of its composition, including all the races it comprises."

"Already," gulped McCoy, wondering not merely at a youthful mind capable of delivering a torrent of material so

rapidly, but also at those more mature minds able to absorb and assimilate it.

At the moment, however, there were other concerns tempering Kirk's admiration of the Lactrans' mental calisthenics.

"All that information ought to include enough facts about ourselves to convince them we're not common animals. How do they look at us now, Mr. Spock?"

"It would appear that they have indeed revised their initial opinions of us," Spock replied, swaying slightly as he struggled to codify the Lactrans' rapid flow of thoughts. "Apparently we are now classed as simplistic life forms in the process of evolving rapidly into a higher order."

"Vulcans included?" McCoy couldn't resist the opportunity.

Spock's intense concentration didn't keep him from sounding slightly annoyed. "Yes, Vulcans included." He frowned as the Lactrans continued to relay information.

"They are confused now."

"That's a hopeful sign," Kirk murmured. "I was beginning to wonder if they were infallible."

"It would seem not, Captain. Several of them are arguing that on closer inspection we may prove in certain unexpected ways to be equal or even superior to them. I cannot follow all of the discussion, but much of it involves the efficacy of instinct as opposed to pure thought."

"No need to ask which of those we're supposed to represent!" McCoy snorted. "I don't know if they're flattering us or insulting us."

"It is purely a zoological question to them, Doctor," Spock explained. "The question of value judgment does not enter into it."

"I can see why they're using you as their go-between." McCoy murmured, but so softly that no one else could hear. Aloud, he observed, "So they think that as far as we're concerned, equality is just around the corner?"

Spock nodded absently, as usual taking no notice of the doctor's sarcasm.

"At the moment I'm more interested in getting back on the *Enterprise* than in reaching their mental level," Kirk declared pointedly. To McCoy's professional gaze the captain appeared and sounded fully recovered from the withering Lactran mind probe which had almost rendered him comatose.

Kirk had no time to consider the speed of his recovery. It had occurred to him that, despite the Lactrans' apparent reconsideration of their human captives, they might find other reasons for not releasing them.

"How do we manage that return—or do we?"

Another pause followed while Spock listened to intense Lactran babytalk and strove to comprehend. If such delays were merely irritating to Kirk, to Markel and Bryce they seemed interminable.

"It appears that we do," the first officer finally informed them. Bryce began to smile. "Under one condition." The smile died aborning.

"While we are still classified as beneath Lactrans on the scale of evolution, they do concede that we do not belong in their zoo. We grade high in certain abilities and low in others. This apparent contradiction continues to puzzle them."

"That's hardly surprising," observed McCoy. "The contradictions within ourselves have been confusing mankind since the beginning of its history."

"What's this condition they're talking about?" Kirk asked, somehow sensing that it involved more than the Lactran equivalent of a handshake. Their captors had some purpose in mind.

He would never have guessed it in a hundred years.

But the Lactrans refused to be hurried.

"Their abstract imagery . . . so difficult to interpret." Again a frown of intense concentration contorted the first officer's face. "They do not feel that those who maintain zoos belong in them."

"I wouldn't have put it that way," Markel commented, fairly shaking with impatience. "How do we get out of theirs, then?"

Spock blinked, turned to the Lactrans, and said, "Like this." He walked toward the display table, past where the invisible

wall had been, and over to the table itself. There was no hum, whine, or revealing flash to announce the abrupt termination of the restraining force field. One moment it was present, and the next it simply was not.

Still pondering the mysterious condition under which the Lactrans would agree to release them, Kirk followed his first officer's lead. McCoy, Scott, and Markel followed him. Lieutenant Bryce hesitated, then turned and started back toward the house to rouse the still weak Randolph.

As the former captives left the enclosure, the front ends of all five Lactrans turned in unison to follow them with almost mechanical, precision—attentively, Kirk thought. While he could not be sure, he was willing to bet that their captors were prepared to prevent any sudden "instinctive" surprises—such as a rapid attempt to beam back up to the ship.

Eyeless stares followed the movements of the humans as they picked up activated phasers, tricorders, and other equipment. Kirk did not miss the expression on Markel's face as the leader of the survey team lovingly fondled the familiar instruments he had longed for these past weeks. There was much more to the way he checked out the devices, replacing many on his belt and survey suit, than simple pleasure at regaining denied possessions. They no longer had the significance given them by captivity, but regaining them held a symbolic significance far greater. Markel found a freedom in handling Federation devices manufactured by Federation machinery and hands, instead of falsely familiar constructs manufactured by an alien keeper.

The survey commander had ample time to indulge himself in the inspection of his lost equipment, because it took some time for Lieutenant Randolph, aided by Bryce, to join them. When she finally appeared, McCoy hurried forward to examine her, moving his hands toward his medikit. She shook off the incipient attention.

"Please Doctor, no drugs. I want to savor every second of our departure from this place. I promise not to collapse until it's into a Federation bed." McCoy hesitated, then smiled and nodded understandingly.

Kirk tried to appear interested in the remaining survey instruments, but his attention was actually focused on the

Lactrans, who appeared to be observing the byplay between McCoy and Randolph. The captain's hand shifted imperceptibly toward the communicator, which once more rested in its familiar place at his side.

The movement was not as imperceptible as he thought, however, because as his fingers touched the smooth edge of the device, the front end of one of the watching adults turned toward him. The fingers slid on past and above the communicator to scratch easily at his belly. He sighed reluctantly. So much for trying to beam clear from under the mental gaze of *these* jailers.

"Very well, Mr. Spock, let's have the details of this condition. I give my word we'll abide by whatever they have in mind." Easy enough to do, he mused sardonically, without a hope of otherwise departing. For a brief moment, he thought he sensed an alien mental laugh.

Spock strained again, beginning to show some signs of fatigue. The process of acting as translator was starting to wear on him.

"It is still difficult, Captain. Their thought processes are so incredibly fast. It is becoming slightly easier, though. We are learning from each other as we continue to communicate. Somehow, I gain the impression that the condition in some way involves this 'zoo'—not quite the proper term, but it must serve."

"If they think we're going to volunteer some substitute exhibits," McCoy began heatedly.

"No, no, Doctor . . . it does not involve the continued presence of humans, Vulcans, or any other Federation-member race."

McCoy calmed down, satisfied.

"It is more complex than that."

"How so, Mr. Spock?" Kirk pressed curiously. The first officer had turned to face the largest of the adult Lactrans.

"I am told by the Old One that their collection is not complete. It will probably never be complete, since the desire for expansion and acquisition has faded on Lactra. There are temporal referents that I do not understand. The Old One explains gently that this does not matter. Apparently, one

especially desired creature is overdue for collection. It is this that they wish us to help rectify."

"One creature?" McCoy echoed uncertainly. "You mean, they want our help in capturing some unknown specimen?"

"Essentially, that is correct, Doctor. It seems that there is one creature they have known about for hundreds of our years yet have not been able to capture because"—the young Lactran moved jerkily, and Spock turned to gaze blankly in its direction—"because they have given up the knowledge of how to construct artificial devices—ships like the *Enterprise*—capable of ranging deep space. They have been content in past centuries to range for specimens close to their own system, and to use the years for refining their mind control. The emphasis in Lactran society has shifted during this period from the practical to the purely aesthetic.

"Yet they still retain knowledge of this one special creature, and wish to obtain a live example of it. It is for this that they request our aid."

Kirk considered gratefully the courtesy of the Lactrans. That they could as easily take control of the *Enterprise* as request the voluntary help of its crew was something he did not doubt. But for some reason it was important to them that such help be given freely.

McCoy walked close. He whispered cautioningly, "I wouldn't be too ready to accept their claim that they've 'forgotten' how to build deep-space ships, Jim."

"If it's an evasion, Bones, there's not much we can do about it. We can either believe them or call them liars. I don't think it would be wise to do the latter. They obviously have their reasons for wanting the use of the *Enterprise* . . . and us."

"Then consider this," the doctor persisted. "If the Lactrans, with all their amply demonstrated abilities, their mental powers, and considerable technology, have been unable to capture this boojum so far, what makes them think we can do any better?"

"Good point, Bones," Kirk agreed willingly. "Transportation we can provide, and we have had some experience handling live alien specimens—everything from tribbles to wauls. But

interstellar big-game hunters we're not." He looked back at his first officer, and his voice rose.

"Explain to them, Spock, that we agree. We're willing to aid in any way we can, in return for our eventual safe departure from Lactra. How should we begin? Do they have any idea where to start looking for this prize creature? We certainly have no experience of it, or the Lactran youngster would have discovered some reference to it during its very thorough examination of our library."

"On the contrary, Captain," explained a listening Spock, "they say we have looked upon the jawanda without seeing it —'jawanda' is the nearest pronunciation-conceptualization they can provide. The actual name is quite unpronounceable.

"Locating one of the creatures is not the difficulty. It is the method of capture, which requires apparatus of a very special type which the Lactrans do not have access to. Nor do we, I am told. Such apparatus is beyond our technology."

"Then how in blazes do they expect us to bring one of these indescribable whatsises back?" McCoy wanted to know.

Spock explained slowly. "To do this we must travel with them to a world known as Boqu. When the Lactrans traveled the Long Crawling past far-distant worlds many *ghids* ago, they chanced on this planet of the Boqus. These people had developed a method of controlling the jawanda. It is the Lactrans' hope that they have not lost that knowledge."

"Hope?" asked Kirk. "Don't they know for sure?"

"No, Captain. There has been no contact between Lactra and Boqu for several *minaghids*."

"*Mina*—how long is that?" McCoy queried, trying to make some sense out of all this talk of jawandas and *ghids* and such.

"It is not precisely—"

"Translatable," the doctor finished for him. "I know, I know."

"But it is a considerable time," Spock concluded.

Kirk thought rapidly, gazing idly at the display table. If the Boqus had lost the required knowledge, the *Enterprise* would simply return its passengers to Lactra. Boqu might not even

be inhabited any longer. Or, despite the Lactrans' encyclopedic store of information, their story could turn out to be a myth accepted as truth.

Nonetheless, it would be even better if he could talk the Lactrans out of the idea. He was very much aware of the compound behind them, its falsely attractive little houses and grounds waiting ominously to rewelcome the recent tenants. The Lactrans could force them back into that landscaped cage as easily as let them leave. He would have to be careful.

"Explain that we would do our utmost to help, Mr. Spock, but that the *Enterprise* has no facilities for the housing and the care of unknown zoological specimens. Even if we managed to capture one of these jawanda creatures, it could die for lack of proper care on the way back to Lactra."

Another of those nerve-tingling silences ensued while he awaited Spock's version of the alien's reply. It was unexpected.

"Their initial reaction—I cannot be positive, of course, Captain, but it seems to be one of mirth. Now the explanation-reply is coming through. They assure us that it will not even be necessary to utilize the *Enterprise* to transport the jawanda. The capture method itself, by its very nature as well as the nature of the jawanda, handles all problems of transportation and care."

Well, it had been worth a try, Kirk reflected. "It all sounds reasonable," he replied guardedly. "How do we go about finding this mysterious Boqu? I've never heard mention of such a world. And, assuming we can locate it, how do we contact the local population and go about explaining what we need?"

"They are not surprised at our ignorance," Spock countered. "Boqu is not an easy world to locate, nor one we would stumble upon in the course of normal exploration. As to finding the planet, as well as to the problems of contacting the Boqus and making the request, they have a simple solution.

"Two of them are going to come with us."

VI

This time it was Kirk's eyebrows which rose in surprise. "I see," he muttered. The thought of having a couple of Lactran superminds on board the *Enterprise*, minds which could at any time take control of the ship, was not a comforting one.

Not that he had any choice, if he did not want to experience the cold comforts of the force cage again. He battled with himself, uncomfortably aware that his answer was awaited.

What was he so worried about, after all? Now that the aliens had been apprised of the actual intelligence of their former captives, now that they were actively seeking their cooperation, what reason to suspect treachery? He could not think of one. Naturally, that set him immediately to try to conjure half a dozen threatening possibilities.

While the captain was debating himself, Spock cocked his head slightly to one side, like a man striving to make sure of something just overheard.

"It appears," the first officer announced finally, "that we may be host to three rather than two Lactrans. The pair which have been selected to come with us are the parents of the young Lactran who was accidentally beamed aboard ship. The youngster is presently arguing vociferously with his parents, insisting that he be allowed to accompany the expedition."

"Doesn't make much difference, I suppose," murmured McCoy. "Two Lactrans or three."

"Our feelings have nothing to do with it, Doctor," Spock informed him. "It is the elder Lactrans' concern which opposes the youth's desire to participate." A pause; then: "They are trying to explain to their offspring that this undertaking is potentially too dangerous to permit it to come along."

McCoy stopped his nervous pacing and glanced up sharply. "Hey, if this is too dangerous for a Lactran youngster, who's already shown he's capable of taking over the ship, I'm not sure I want to—"

Kirk cut him off. "We have little choice, Bones—remember?" His attention was drawn to Scott. Strangely, the chief engineer was grinning. "You find the situation amusing, Scotty?"

"What? Well, part of it, Captain, yes. I canna follow the chatter of the adults, like Mr. Spock, but I have a bit of a rapport with the youngster. He overheard what Dr. McCoy just said. Now he's tellin' his parents that if they don't allow him to come along, then *we* might consider the trip too dangerous for *us*. So they have to take him along to convince us."

Kirk found himself smiling in response. "Not only precocious, but a budding diplomat. How is his argument going over, Mr. Spock?"

The first officer replied slowly. "Very well, it would seem, Captain. The adults acknowledge the validity of the youth's claims, which is more important to them than our possible refusal. They could force us to do their bidding"—Kirk shuddered in remembrance of the mental assault he'd so recently endured—"but feel that for two already stated reasons this would not be right: because we are not animals, and because the success of the undertaking requires full and enthusiastic cooperation on both sides."

"We've already consented to cooperate, Mr. Spock," Kirk replied readily, "though I can't vouch for our enthusiasm. All right, we'll aid them in capturing a single jawanda, whatever it is, and in returning it and them to Lactra. That will discharge our obligation to them." He did not bother to ask what assurance the Lactrans would give that they would adhere to their end of the bargain. He could not very well force them into anything. The men of the Federation were entering into a possibly dangerous situation on faith, a course acceptable only because of the absence of alternatives.

But he was curious. "What kind of guarantee do they want to insure that we'll follow through on our part of the agreement?"

Spock frowned as though Kirk had said something betraying ignorance of the obvious. "They see the honesty of your response in your mind, Captain. No further assurance is necessary. They are appalled that such a thing could be considered."

Kirk grunted; he was satisfied. "So much for intangibles. Getting down to basics"—he studied the huge bulk of the adult Lactrans—"we come to the matter of accommodations."

"They say you have no reason to worry, Captain," the first officer declared. "While their society may appear complex, it is actually as simple as their needs. From what their offspring has told them of the *Enterprise*, they feel they will be quite comfortable in an empty cargo hold. They see no reason why our food synthesizers cannot produce nourishment acceptable to their systems. Other than this, they anticipate nothing in the way of special requirements even if the trip should prove one of extended duration."

"That's a relief," Kirk answered feelingly, leaving aside for the moment the troubling question of what constituted a journey of "extended duration" for a Lactran.

Just how far away *was* this Boqu?

McCoy had sidled over close to him. "Just had a worrisome thought, Jim."

"Only one?" Kirk managed the first real smile in days. "What is it now?"

"We're supposed to be carrying out a straightforward rescue mission. Before too much more time passes, Starfleet Headquarters is liable to get nervous about the absence of reports. What do we tell them if they manage to contact us?" He nodded once, significantly, toward the silent Lactrans.

Kirk shrugged. "They'll assume we're still searching for Lieutenant Commander Markel and his ship. If anyone inquires beyond that . . ." He paused thoughtfully. "We needn't go into details. Sometimes a starship captain has to make treaties with newly met races without the aid of formal diplomacy, has to create procedure in order to respond to exigencies not covered in the manuals. Our agreement to cooperate with the Lactrans has the status of a temporary treaty."

"Under what classification?" McCoy inquired relentlessly.

"Expediency." The captain's smile vanished as Kirk considered exactly what they might be getting themselves into. "Maybe it would be better to tell the truth and, if anyone asks, say we've gone a-hunting. I wish we knew for what."

"The Lactrans are prepared, Captain," Spock informed him. "They have given in to their young, and it will accompany them. If all is in readiness, they are anxious to depart."

Kirk wasn't anxious, but saw no excuse for further delay. He spoke to Scott. "Tell Chief Kyle to beam us back aboard, making allowance for three regular-size guests and three large ones." He gestured toward the Lactrans.

The chief engineer already had his communicator out and open. "All right, Captain."

"And have the chief use the transporter nearest Shuttle Bay for our Lactran visitors. The corridors are larger there and will make it easier for them to move around, if they so desire."

Scott nodded assent and relayed the instructions to the ship. The Lactrans appeared thoroughly absorbed as several of the humans vanished. Then they themselves were gone, accompanied by Kirk and Spock.

Once back on board the *Enterprise*, Kirk's first concern was to make certain the Lactrans were comfortably ensconced in their temporary quarters. Despite the sterility of the surroundings in the empty cargo hold, they professed to be quite satisfied with the amenities.

Leaving Spock to tend to any immediate alien requests, Kirk made his way quickly to Sick Bay. McCoy and Nurse Chapel were already well along in their detailed examination of the three surviving explorers.

"Markel and Bryce are in excellent shape, Jim," the doctor told him, "as would befit valuable exhibits."

"And Lieutenant Randolph?"

"She'll be all right eventually, but she needs about a month of doing nothing." McCoy grinned. "Sometimes that's the hardest prescription to assign. She's an active type, physically and mentally, and it's going to be difficult to keep her confined in a bed." The smile faded, to be replaced by a look of concern. "Confined she'll be, though. Her system is badly weakened."

"It may be improved when the official report reaches Starfleet, Bones. Endurance under conditions of stress is often grounds for promotion. At least you won't have to worry

about the jawanda—assuming we can find and capture such a creature. The Lactrans are convinced it won't require any kind of attention. Spock is still trying to draw the details of the animal out of them, but the conceptualizations, as he keeps putting it, are confusing. Also, some of our preconceptions about jawandas appear to amuse our guests no end."

"I'm glad they think it's funny," McCoy observed wryly, indicating that he saw very little humor in the situation. His gaze, revealingly, was on the bedridden Randolph. "I haven't exactly warmed up to our elephantine guests."

"Think friendly thoughts, Bones," Kirk advised him strongly, reminding him of the Lactrans' mental abilities.

Satisfied that the three survivors were okay, Kirk headed for the bridge. Jawanda, jawanda . . . the name meant nothing to him. He could not even vaguely relate it to any creature he had ever heard of. Well, the Lactrans would have to clarify the nature of their quarry soon enough. There was no real need to worry so long as it wasn't going to be transported on board the ship.

It didn't occur to Kirk to consider the possibility that perhaps, for certain reasons, it could not be.

Spock and McCoy were waiting for him when he returned to the bridge. Their presence was expected; that of their new companion was not.

"I was about to order the installation of a special intercom unit for the use of the adult Lactrans in the converted hold, Captain," explained the first officer, "so that they would be in constant communication with us. They informed me that this was not only unnecessary, but a waste of equipment." He gestured at the long gray mass near the science station, the front end of which was presently exploring Spock's instrumentation.

"Their offspring will remain on the bridge. As it is always in telepathic contact with its parents, it can convey their impressions to us and a description of what takes place on the bridge to them instantaneously, without the need for, as they put it, awkward mechanical contrivances. He fits into the turbolifts, while the adults do not."

"Thank the adults for their consideration, Mr. Spock," Kirk told him. While he was not thrilled by the prospect of having a superintelligent child underfoot for the duration of the journey, he could not deny the logic behind its presence.

While it might be unnecessary, there was something else he ought to do. Moving to the command chair, Kirk activated the interdeck communications network and addressed the pickup:

"Attention, all personnel. This is the captain speaking. We are about to embark on an expedition of indeterminate length to perform a service for our newfound friends, the Lactrans, inhabitants of the planet about which we are orbiting. Concurrent with this, we will have as our guests three representatives of that race. Several of you have already noticed their arrival on board. The Lactrans are natural telepaths and . . . curious. The actions of an alien life form, or its shape, should not prove offensive to any of you or you wouldn't be part of this crew.

"Two adult Lactrans are presently installed in temporary quarters in cargo hold Fourteen-B. A third, an adolescent of the species, is at present with me on the bridge, but it has been given the run of the ship." He forbore adding that there was no way he could restrict the youthful alien's activities. It was only good diplomacy to grant gracious assent to the inevitable.

"Bear in mind that this is the young, however intelligent, of a species. It may be inclined to act in sometimes inexplicable fashion. Rest assured that, however misdirected, such actions are in no way hostile. I stress this so that no one will react in a manner in any way other than friendly toward our guests." So that, he finished silently, our guests don't get peeved and decide to take over the ship.

Ending the transmission, he rose again and spoke to the helm: "Stand by to get underway, Mr. Sulu."

"Standing by, sir," the helmsman acknowledged.

"Spock, Bones—let's go greet our passengers and find out the details of this expedition."

The two adult Lactrans were lolling about the cargo hold, apparently somnolent. Spock assured Kirk and McCoy that,

despite the appearance of inactivity, the minds of both adults were as active and alert as ever. As he sat down, Kirk felt a tingling probe at the back of his skull and knew the correctness of the first officer's announcement.

He had expected the young Lactran to accompany them for this formal explanatory session, but the youngster had chosen to remain on the bridge, in the company of Engineer Scott. Several members of the crew had already remarked that the young alien followed Scott around like a dog attending its master.

"Before you enjoy that analogy," the chief engineer had responded, "keep in mind that in this case the 'dog' is twenty times smarter than the 'master.' "

Glancing approvingly around the hold, Kirk saw that Scotty's technicians had installed some recreational simulacrum machinery. Despite their insistence that nothing in the way of material comfort was required, he thought he sensed the Lactrans' approval at the way in which the "simplistic" machinery projected three-dimensional reproductions of the Lactran surface on the bare metal walls.

"They are indeed pleased, Captain," Spock informed him, unnervingly confirming his unspoken supposition, "though more by our concern for their comfort than by the actual projections themselves."

Kirk shifted in his chair. "If everyone's comfortable, then perhaps they can give us a course?"

"Naturally, Captain." Spock paused a moment, then replied, sooner than Kirk had expected, "They apparently have already done so."

There was a buzz from the cargo-hold intercom, and Kirk rose to answer it. "Kirk here."

"Captain"—it was Sulu's voice: excited, confused, and just a bit awed—"something just jumped inside my head. It was—"

"A series of coordinates," Kirk finished for him, turning to study the impassive Lactrans respectfully.

"Yes, sir—but how did you know?"

"Never mind that, Mr. Sulu. Were the coordinates precise?"

"Very, Captain."

"That's our new course, then. Lay them in. All ahead warp-factor four."

"Yes, sir," the helmsman replied, his tone slightly dazed. "Bridge out."

Kirk walked back to the chair and resumed his seat slowly. "Mr. Spock?"

"The adults relayed the information to their offspring, Captain, the moment they sensed the request in your mind. The youth, in turn, planted them clearly in the thoughts of Lieutenant Sulu."

"Wonderful communications system," observed McCoy, a mite sourly, feeling even more left out of things than usual.

"I presume the terminus of those coordinates is Boqu?" Kirk commented, expecting a casual assent. It wasn't quite forthcoming.

"The Lactrans hope so, Captain," Spock told him. It took barely a second for the import of that reply to sink in.

"Hope?" a startled Kirk blurted quickly. "What do they mean, 'hope'? I understood that they knew exactly where this world lies!"

Spock was shaking his head slowly, his eyes half glazed. "They do and yet they do not, Captain. It was such a long time ago that the last Lactran ship went out to Boqu. The records involved are quite old. The coordinates should lead us directly to Boqu, but the Lactrans cannot say this for certain. For various reasons its position in the plenum is not easy to plot."

"What," Kirk went on, taking a long, slow breath, "if Boqu doesn't exist where these ancient coordinates insist it's supposed to?"

This time Spock's reply was longer in coming. "If that is the case, the Lactrans say, we will have to begin a search for its present location."

Kirk started to object, then caught himself. It was impossible to tell what the aliens might consider an unfriendly gesture. Pointing out to them that the *Enterprise* could not spend an infinite number of years looking for a world that might be only an old rumor might so be interpreted. Which led him uncomfortably back to the possibility of the

Enterprise's operating under Lactran control, without his cooperation.

He saw the *Enterprise* spiraling farther and farther out from an empty point in space, stopping only to take on fresh supplies at support bases, to pick up new dilithium crystals and power elements. He watched their Lactran hosts insist on a continuation of the search, the ship's crew growing older and older in pursuit of a mythical planet . . . How long did Lactrans live, anyway? He suspected that it was well beyond the normal human or even Vulcan life span.

It would be best to shunt that unpleasant scenario aside and hope that the Lactrans' ancient records were as remarkable as their mental powers.

"Now that we know where we're going," he declared to Spock, and thus to the pair of watching aliens, "perhaps we can have some more information on what exactly it is we're going for? Can they describe one of these jawandas for us?"

Spock, attentive, recited slowly, as though from the pages of an old, old book: "A jawanda is a large, asexual creature of unusual appearance with interesting coloring." He blinked and looked across at the other two officers. "That's all."

McCoy grimaced. "That's not very informative, Spock. Couldn't they be a little more descriptive?"

"The Lactrans wish they could, Doctor," the first officer explained. "They indicate that much information is contained in records long since become dust. It is yet another reason why they have been so anxious to secure a specimen for their collection."

Kirk's fingers drummed softly on one arm of the chair. "You said it was a large creature, Mr. Spock. Do the Lactrans know how large?"

Spock assumed an expression of indifference. "It varies considerably from specimen to specimen, it seems. Again, the old records are distressingly poor in detail."

"If information is so scanty," an impatient McCoy muttered, "how do they expect to identify a jawanda? They're not even sure what it looks like." The Lactrans appeared for the first time to confer between themselves.

"They say this does not matter, Doctor," announced Spock languidly, with only a slight frown.

McCoy threw up his hands in a gesture of frustration. "Now how can anyone go hunting for something when they aren't sure of its appearance? Of all the—"

"The Lactrans go on to say, Doctor, that there is even a chance the jawanda looks like nothing."

"I've had it, Jim! Sounds to me like we're on a wild-goose chase—and we're not even sure what the wild goose looks like."

Kirk rose from his chair. "It looks like there's only one way we're going to find out, Bones, and that's to go to Boqu. The answer to the Lactrans' riddle is supposed to lie there. We'll find out the same time they do . . . if we get to the world all right."

"If there *is* a Boqu," grumbled McCoy, rising to join him in leaving the hold.

Silent, the adult Lactrans watched them go.

The following day Kirk entered the bridge determined to locate the world in question. It could be incredibly obscure, but there was still a good chance it circled a sun listed in the star catalog, even if it was itself as yet unsurveyed.

Already he knew it lay a respectable distance from the Federation periphery. A simple comparison of the coordinates with the many maps locked in his memory had told him that no explored systems were situated in their present path. Even so, the actual figures provided a greater surprise than he'd anticipated. Sitting in the command chair, he studied the printout on the main viewscreen.

"Deeper, Mr. Sulu," he said, and the helmsman replaced the chart with the star configuration lying behind it, and then replaced it again. And again. And yet again. Their present course showed as a glowing red line from one end of each three-dimensional chart to the next without intersecting a single system, without passing near even a postulated solar body.

Finally Kirk was prompted to ask, "Mr. Sulu, are you certain of those coordinates?"

The helmsman looked back over his shoulder and nodded readily. "Absolutely, sir. They appeared in my mind like fluorescent block letters, and remained there until I had them memorized in spite of myself." He shook his head admiringly. "Our visitors convey their information in a manner I envy."

"I see." Kirk studied the uninformative chart projection a moment longer. "Double-check it anyway, please." He turned toward the science station. "Mr. Spock?"

The first officer went into a momentary trance, regarding the gray mass nearby. Seconds later, Sulu also appeared to drift into a brief dreamlike state before looking back to Kirk.

"No question, sir . . . we're on the course they've indicated."

"Thank you, Mr. Sulu. That's all."

Leaning back, the captain considered their present path. A divergence of even a fraction of a degree in one of several directions would have led them to at least three systems, all unexplored but logged. Their actual course, however, was taking them out of the galaxy at approximately a right angle to the galactic ecliptic. No wonder the charts were rapidly growing devoid of stellar phenomena.

"Deeper, Mr. Sulu," he ordered again. The chart was replaced by another, almost blank, save for a few isolated, lonely suns and several drifting nebulae. Beyond was nothing. Absolutely nothing.

"Mr. Spock," he began, looking toward the science station and studiously ignoring the Lactran offspring, "have the Lactrans recheck their memories. Maybe there are several possible locations given in their old records for this planet."

Spock listened to something no one else could hear. Eventually he replied, "They have been monitoring your conversation through their offspring, Captain. They assure me that the coordinates transferred to Mr. Sulu are the only ones given by the ancients for the world known as Boqu."

"Are they aware," Kirk continued gently, "that if we continue on our present course, the first sun we encounter will be an unknown star in M33, the Triangulum Spiral, roughly two point three five *million* light-years away?" He added drily, "If this is the location of Boqu, we won't get there for quite a while."

"While regarding this as a doubtful possibility, Captain, they refuse to discount it," Spock replied. "They are considering it with some interest."

"Not as much as I am," Kirk responded rapidly. "Long before we could reach that system, everyone and everything on board, including the warp-drive engines, would be long dead—the Lactrans included."

"They are aware of this, Captain," Spock continued, listening hard. "They theorize that Boqu must lie somewhat nearer."

"Somewhat?" McCoy muttered nervously.

"There is something else, Captain," the first officer added. "They are wondering if the Boqus will still retain the knowledge and means necessary for capturing a jawanda. They also recall information indicating that the Boqus are a traditionally private folk, and wonder if they might not also have forgotten their former association with the Lactrans. If this is so, there is always the possibility of a hostile greeting."

"Charming," Kirk noted dully. "Any other small details like that last one that they might have neglected to tell us?"

"No, Captain," Spock insisted evenly. "Not at the moment."

Days lengthened into weeks, with no sign of a possible destination. The *Enterprise* was still running at warp-four, two factors below her maximum safe cruising speed. Instead of nearing some unexpected system on the fringe of the galaxy, they drew farther away from all signs of activity and motion. The last star marking the boundary of the home galaxy lay far astern. Kirk had watched it fade from the rear scanners, a dying beacon, and could not shrug off a sense of awesome isolation.

More days passed, and Kirk found himself brooding in the command chair for long hours, staring at the viewscreen. Long-range scanners focused rearward showed a falsely dense-seeming arc of brightness behind them: the spiral arm of the galaxy they were crawling away from. Somewhere back there lay the Federation, and life in all its swarming multitudes.

Ahead lay a darkness so vast and empty that he felt like a child tiptoeing into a colossal cavern—the incomprehensible abyss of intergalactic space.

And still the Lactrans insisted stonily that they were on course for Boqu. Kirk's sense of desperation reached the point at which he was considering forcing a confrontation with the starship's imperturbable passengers, even risking a takeover, when a cry came from the helm:

"Captain, I've got something on the fore sensors!"

"Position, Mr. Sulu?" Kirk inquired, trying to keep the excitement from his voice.

"Dead on course, sir." A pause; then the uncertain information, "It appears to be a star, sir, but not much of a star."

"Confirmed, Captain." Kirk's attention moved to the science station and to Spock, who was staring intently into his gooseneck viewer. "It is a star, with from six to eight companion planets and two belts of asteroidal debris. A KO dwarf, I think, and probably fairly old. Surface temperature low, even for a weak star of its type."

"Anything out here can be classed as a freak, Mr. Spock," Kirk commented interestedly. "Planets it may have, but I don't see how a habitable world could circle a sun that weak. It would have to lie awfully close in, and there would have to be a host of factors compensating for—" he broke off at a loud *humphing* sound from near the science station.

The young Lactran was giving every indication of heightened interest as its front end regarded the screen, which now showed a distant point of white-orange light. Obviously, it was communicating with its parents and with Spock.

"According to all indications," the first officer announced, "that is the Boquian system."

Kirk wanted to believe, but "I don't understand, Mr. Spock. A habitable world out here, circling a sun like this one, and completely isolated from the rest of the galaxy! It staggers the imagination. It's impossible." There was a buzz, and Spock paused long enough to acknowledge a report from belowdecks.

"Not according to the astronomy section, Captain. They cannot wait until we enter the system and they can begin close-in observation."

"You said there were six to eight planets, Mr. Spock," Kirk went on, wishing he could be as unrestrainedly happy as the astronomers. "Which one is Boqu?"

"The old records are barely adequate for identification, Captain. However, I am assured that we will know it when the adults, through the mind of their offspring, sight it."

"Very well. Mr. Sulu, begin survey with the outermost world and take us in one planet at a time."

"Aye, Captain," the helmsman acknowledged.

They moved into the system, passing and rejecting several large dead worlds. Planets five through three proved to be gas giants. The second out from the chill star looked no more promising.

"Boqu," Spock declared firmly, staring fascinatedly at the viewscreen.

"Are you sure, Spock?"

"The Lactrans are, Captain."

Kirk shrugged. "Place us in parking orbit, Mr. Sulu."

"Yes, Captain."

Boqu looked like yet another gas giant, but as they moved nearer the *Enterprise*'s sensors began to produce some surprising information.

Boqu possessed certain similarities to Uranus and Jupiter, but it was not a Jovian-type planet. It did put out more radiation than it received from its cinder of a sun. A certain amount of this radiation was being trapped beneath a dense orange cloud layer, heavy with carbon dioxide.

The resultant greenhouse effect was as natural as it was unexpected, creating a surface warm enough to shelter life, though life that would have to be radically different from that on Earth or Vulcan. There was little water vapor and no evidence of free water on the surface.

Boqu was an enormous world, as large as Neptune, but a true planet and not simply a small inner core covered by a huge atmosphere. Yet its gravity was barely half again as

Earth's, indicating an absence of heavy metals and a light core.

Still, it was not what Kirk would call a hospitable world. Life-support belts would provide them with warmth, a breathable atmosphere, and protection from strong radiation, but could do nothing to counter the stronger gravity. They would have to handle the strain of one and a half g's as best they were able.

He thought of the Lactrans. Undoubtedly they could tolerate the gravity, but they had evolved on a world similar to Earth. To travel comfortably on the surface of Boqu they would need life-support belts too. Constructing life-support belts for the Lactrans would fall to Mr. Scott's ever inventive staff, but the problem might prove troublesome even to those resourceful minds. Not all the Lactrans' mental prowess would prevail against a poisonous atmosphere. Therefore, the first explorations of Boqu's surface would fall to members of the *Enterprise*'s crew—if there was any reason to explore that surface.

Several days of shifting orbit around the planet served only to justify Kirk's initial pessimism. With every scientific instrument on board trained on the surface, they were unable to discover any sign of life.

Kirk became convinced that if anything had ever inhabited this peculiar world, it had long since become extinct. Spock and the Lactrans were not so readily persuaded.

"There could be any number of reasons for our failure to detect life below, Captain," the first officer argued, following another day of fruitless searching. "For one thing, the enormous quantity and variety of radiation the planet is generating makes it extremely difficult for our sensors to separate signs of intelligent surface communication from natural emissions."

"If there *is* any intelligence down there," sniped McCoy.

Spock continued, ignoring the doctor. "Surface conditions on such a world might have forced the inhabitants into other methods of long-range communication."

"It's not only that," a troubled Kirk admitted. "We have instruments capable of piercing the cloud layer. They detect

nothing we recognize as motile life on the surface."

"What we recognize as life forms a very narrow band in the spectrum of possibilities, Captain."

"A valid point, Spock, but that still leaves us with the problem of identifying *any* life form below." He gestured at the screen, where dense orange-and-pink clouds completely covered a surface many, many times greater in area than Earth's.

"Presumably we could detect life firsthand, but this world is gigantic. To drop below the atmosphere and explore visually from shuttles would take forever." He brooded silently a moment. "What about the Lactrans? Do they have any suggestions?"

"No, Captain," confessed the first officer. "They can add nothing . . . except to reaffirm that this system and this world fit all the ancient descriptions of Boqu. Though they are willing to grant, when I press them, the slim possibility that, for all their reputed knowledge and advanced technology, the Boqus may have become extinct."

"Advanced technology on a world devoid of heavy metals—that's something else I find difficult to swallow," Kirk murmured. "I admit the existence of this world because I'm looking at it, but that's all." His gaze turned to the quiet young Lactran. "Tell the youth to convey this to his parents: We'll circle and study for another of our weeks. If by that time we've turned up *no* evidence of intelligent life, they'll consent to return home." His eyes moved to the rim of the planet, to the total blackness of intergalactic space beyond. No friendly stars formed a perceivable backdrop for this world.

"It's cold out here."

A longer-than-usual wait ensued before the Lactrans replied. Clearly, the guests of the *Enterprise* were struggling through some hard debating among themselves.

"They are reluctant to return empty—a conceptualization I cannot translate, Captain—without a specimen. Yet they do not dispute the validity of your statements. They are agreed. We shall search the surface another week and then we may depart."

"With our obligation to them discharged? We'll leave Lactra's orbit unmolested?"

Spock nodded. "There will be nothing more to restrain us."

The light struck them on the fifth day.

VII

Alarms howled and sensors on the bridge and in all the attentive science stations went berserk as the brilliant beam illumined the *Enterprise* from below, pinioning it in a shaft of intense white radiance powerful enough to pierce the thick clouds. It hit without warning, harmlessly.

When it became apparent that the beam was not dangerous, the brief moment of fear and panic was instantly replaced by curiosity. The radiance was not a gesture of belligerence, but rather the cutting cry of someone shouting, "I'm here, I'm here! Look below, and find me!"

The light vanished, then winked on again. This time instruments other than alarms were ready. The light blinked on and off in regular, obviously unnatural sequence. There was no doubt that it originated from an artificial source.

A source, Kirk mused, of tremendous power, to be able to penetrate that smothering atmosphere and still light up the exterior of the *Enterprise*. The on/off pattern continued for several minutes before halting—permanently, it developed.

"A signal, certainly," Kirk observed, voicing everyone's conclusion aloud. "But why did they break off? Why not continue to guide us down?"

"Perhaps they are incapable of maintaining that strength for very long, Captain," was Spock's comment. "Merely to pierce the cloud layer with such force once is a remarkable feat. To repeat it several times is almost beyond comprehension. Clearly there is intelligence of singular ability still active on the surface below."

Kirk looked to the helm. "Mr. Sulu, did you obtain a fix on the source of the beam?"

The helmsman studied his instrumentation a moment longer before replying. "Yes, Captain—as clear as I was able without actually having direct line of sight to the surface. I'm assuming it traveled outward in a straight line, though it could

have been bent or otherwise distorted by some layer in the atmosphere."

"I think not, Lieutenant," countered Spock. "Any beam of sufficient intensity to penetrate that cloud layer and still retain its power of illumination at this distance, apparently undiminished, would likely not be affected by any cloud formation nearer its source."

"We have a destination, then," Kirk noted, rising from the command chair. "Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy, you'll accompany me to the surface." He nodded at the young Lactran. "Together with our youthful friend, if his parents are agreeable."

Spock's eyebrows arose, and even the Lactran adolescent looked surprised. Kirk felt unaccountably pleased at having been able to startle the seemingly unshakable aliens.

"But how, Jim?" McCoy asked. "Scott's technicians are still working on the problem of life-support belts for Lactrans and —"

"We'll descend in the shuttlecrawler, Bones. It's spacious enough to hold four of us and our young guest, if not either of his much larger parents."

"They are concerned, Captain, but see no reason to object. It is important that they be represented in some fashion. They agree to let the young one go, even though it must remain in the crawler."

Kirk had no idea which gesticulations were indicative of pleasure among Lactrans, but it seemed certain that the youngster was performing some of them now.

He turned to communications. "Security, Lieutenant Uhura. I'll want Lieutenant Meyers to pilot the shuttlecrawler."

"Very well, Captain." Uhura moved to contact the crewman.

With the young Lactran aboard, the shuttlecrawler was loaded close to maximum. So much so that there was no room for the large, well-armed security team Kirk would have liked to take along—he hadn't forgotten the Lactrans' claim that the Boqus might seek to enforce their privacy. Instead, he had to count on the Lactrans' familiarity and former association with the race which now might still survive on the hidden surface.

The shuttlecrawler's descent to the coordinates plotted by Sulu and others was memorable, a welcome change from the convenience but monotony of the transporter. They soared down through an atmosphere structured like a cotton candy parfait.

Its outermost layers were thick, rich orange and gray and pink. These colors gave way gradually to bright red-orange, then kilometers of raging maroon, then to a wholly unexpected layer of brilliant blue-green, which merged in its turn into a lavish red.

Eventually they emerged into a relatively clear layer above the surface and were able to look up at the sky as the Boqus saw it. Overhead rolled a thick collage of mauve cumulus, while hundreds of kilometers off to the south-southeast the threatening hemispheres of argent nimbus seemed to bubble and collapse like shiny balloons in a bucket of blood.

Kirk forgot their mission momentarily as he, Spock, and McCoy stared raptly at the silver storm. Sequential flashes of many-fingered lightning bolts deluged the surface with millions of volts.

Rising to meet the shuttlecrawler was a dimly visible landscape of orange and brown. The ground was pock-marked with deep pores filled with liquid ammonia. Kirk would do no swimming on this world. Lieutenant Meyers remained professionally oblivious to this beauty as he skillfully guided the craft down through unexpected blasts of hurricane-force wind.

Vegetation became identifiable as Lieutenant Meyers dropped them still lower. It was predominantly yellow and orange, with isolated patches of sparkling white. Kirk thought he saw a multiple-limbed growth half as big as the *Enterprise* reflecting the light like a diamond and hinting of a composition other than cellulose.

Meyers spiraled in around the point plotted by Sulu. It was near the end of their approach that McCoy exclaimed in surprise and pointed forward.

Ahead lay a valley. One end was dominated by the glassy surface of a large lake of as yet unknown composition. The

other was filled with an enormous fanlike artificial construction mounted on struts sufficient to make a millipede jealous. In the foreground was a city.

"Meyers?" Kirk inquired simply.

"Yes, sir. According to my coordinates, that should be the source of the light beam." Visual reconnaissance accomplished, he banked the awkward shuttlecrawler in the direction of the fan end of the valley. They began passing over the city, and the expectations suddenly raised so high vanished. Even the young Lactran appeared to droop.

Because it was dead. Dead as the hollow sockets of an old, bleached skull. Not that it was crumbling and broken like a hundred similar urban mausoleums Kirk had seen before. In fact, it looked remarkably well preserved. But nothing moved in its streets; no vehicles stirred between structures or above them. The silence below them was of the dead, or, at least, of the dying.

They flew on for a surprising distance over abandoned edifices, past towering spires and the gaping defunct domes resembling antique jewelry from which a patient thief had pried all the gems. As the city continued to unroll beneath them, Kirk began to sense its true size, and that of the fanlike structure they were nearing.

Almost as if in response to their filling spirits, a faint sign of life caught their attention, as well as that of the sensors.

From the far end of the valley, defining their destination, the light beam began to rise, this time but a feeble imitation, a shadow in light of the cloud-piercing shaft which had bathed the *Enterprise* in unexpected radiance. It barely rose above the valley, straining for an intensity apparently no longer attainable.

Once, twice, it flickered, the second time almost reaching to the lowest layer of orange clouds before dying.

But those on board the shuttlecrawler, who had begun to give up hope, it was as encouraging as a neon sign the size of a Starfleet station. Meyers swung the shuttlecrawler lower, cutting speed as rapidly as he dared in the tricky, buffeting winds.

"Ask our friend," Kirk told Spock, "to see if he can sense any alien thoughts nearby." In contrast to this world, the young Lactran seemed welcomingly familiar.

There was a short pause, at the conclusion of which Spock informed them, "There is nothing, but I am told it does not matter. It is only what was expected. According to the records relevant to Boqu, they were never able to communicate mentally with the inhabitants over any distance. A Lactran, to touch the mind of a Boqus, would have to be in its actual presence."

Kirk refused to be discouraged. "Something caused that beam to be generated, whether the Lactrans can detect the mind behind it or not. Something that wanted to signal the *Enterprise* and a moment ago attempted to signal us."

"It could have been automatic, self-sustaining machinery, Captain," Spock pointed out coolly.

"Always encouraging, that's our Spock," declared McCoy with false gaiety. The shuttlecrawler rocked in a gust of hot orange wind, and he put out a hand to steady himself.

"I wish you would refrain from overutilization of the possessive form, Doctor," the first officer replied. "I was merely pointing out that—"

"Later, you two!" Kirk snapped. "Have a look at that." He pointed out the side port.

They were nearing the metallic fan, as peculiar a conglomeration as Kirk had ever set eyes on. It resembled the work of some careful colossus of a spider. Not that of a web spider, whose miniature marvels of engineering follow magnificently mathematical patterns, rather the simple cobwebs of the less precise arachnid, which throws and tosses its strands of silk with seeming abandon in any convenient corner, creating a less dignified though equally effective trap.

To the immediate right of this enormous arrangement of struts, beams, cables, and things Kirk couldn't name was a long, low building isolated from the nearest part of the city. Like the other structures they'd passed over, this one appeared relatively well maintained.

"Try to set down as close to that building as possible, Meyers," Kirk instructed.

"Yes, sir. I think there's enough clear space alongside."

As they commenced their final drop, Kirk gazed wonderingly at the huge construct. That it was the generator of the light beam he had no doubt. "It's not a mirror, Spock," he commented, "it has exactly the opposite of a smooth surface."

"According to the Lactrans," the first officer explained, "the peculiar light-metal and stone technology of the Boqus originated in a unique mind. The Lactrans do not find it unusual, therefore, that Boquian physics should find unique expression—"

"You can ask them yourself in a minute, Jim," McCoy broke in, settling himself tensely in his seat. "We're setting down."

Meyers made an admirable landing under difficult turbulence conditions. Once down, he engaged the ground engine, and the shuttlecrawler instantly became a vehicle for surface transport. They moved slowly toward the single large building near the fan construct.

Kirk saw that it was several stories high, with a gently curving roof. Totally devoid of windows or similar apertures, it appeared to be constructed of gray rock, though he did not doubt that on closer inspection the material might turn out to be something considerably more sophisticated. A race did not evolve and mature on a world like this, make contact successfully with an advanced people like the Lactrans, retain the technology capable of producing, even briefly, that atmosphere-slicing light beam, while building out of plain rock.

Gradually they neared the barnlike structure and began hunting along its edge for something that might be an entrance. They finally discovered one, facing the immense latticework of metal, which towered above them now like a forest of gigantic trees grown in free-fall and then transported to the planet's surface.

Kirk unstrapped himself and moved to the port, walking with considerable difficulty under the strong gravity. Beyond lay the vast enigmatic building, containing either aid for additional journeying or only a mechanical apologist for a dead civilization.

"I feel like I'm wearing lead boots," McCoy complained, fighting to keep from falling over under the increased gravity.

"At least we don't need armor suits, Bones," pointed out Kirk. "Be grateful for small favors."

"The only small favor I'll be grateful for is an indication we can return home," the doctor replied irritably, though his irritation was directed more at his own clumsiness in the one and a half g's than at the captain.

Like men drugged, Kirk, Spock, McCoy, and Meyers spent several long minutes moving experimentally about the cabin of the shuttlecrawler, trying to acclimate themselves to their increased weight. The young Lactran watched with interest. His strange physical configuration enabled him to move about with relative ease, though there were no signs that might be interpreted as amusement as he regarded the awkward movements of the men. Possibly, Kirk mused, the trip was having a maturing effect upon him.

"It regrets being unable to accompany us, Captain, but will be in constant communication with us through me as we explore the building. It expresses anxiety for our safety."

Kirk made an effort at effortlessness. "Tell it we'll manage," he told Spock. "Life-support belts, gentlemen."

Each man donned one of the thick, self-contained belts which had long ago (excepting special situations) made the restrictive "space suits" of primitive times obsolete. Activation produced lime-yellow auras around them, whereupon they entered the lock of the shuttlecrawler and waited as machinery cycled the air and opened the outside door. Walking carefully but with increasing confidence, they moved down the ramp and found themselves standing on the densely packed, gravelly surface of Boqu.

"Anything from our young friend, Spock?"

"Nothing, Captain. He can sense nothing."

Kirk hadn't expected anything else. "Tell it to keep us informed of any change it can sense . . . and of any suggestions it comes up with as to how to proceed."

"Very well, Captain."

More than anything else, the featureless structure resembled an enormous warehouse, though Kirk doubted that

was its actual function. It rose seamlessly above them and blended into the distant curving roof.

Directly before them what looked like several doors were recessed into the wall, scattered seemingly at random at various distances from one another.

"Might as well try the nearest one as any and go on from there," Kirk announced, his open communicator carrying his words to his companions.

Lightning flashed nearby as they began walking slowly toward the closest door. Spock's attention was still partially diverted by the giant jackstraw arrangement behind them. "A remarkable feat of engineering," he murmured. "The principles behind it imply a metallurgic technology radically different from our own. I wish I knew how it was built, let alone how it generates the radiance it does."

"Maybe the Boqus can tell you," advised McCoy, "if any are left."

They had all reached the wall and stopped before the first recess. The door was of an unmistakably different composition from that of the structure's exterior, and had the look of machined metal. The recess was narrow at the top and quite wide at the base, rather like a pyramid with a domed crown, and rose to a height of two and a half meters.

"Indicative of heavy-gravity physiology," observed Spock easily.

"That's assuming this entrance is designed for the Boqus themselves," argued McCoy. "For all we know, this could be a local livestock barn. Maybe the Boqus were tall and spindly and just raised squatty cattle."

"Unlikely, Doctor," countered a disapproving Spock.

Attempts to open the door which formed the far wall of the niche met with failure. Attempts to open succeeding doors met with successive failures. Not only did none of them show signs of opening, they betrayed no hint of how they might be opened. Inspect as they might, the little party could find nothing resembling a handle, knob, keyhole, depression-response pit, or anything else they would have recognized.

Kirk was about to try a swift kick on the sixth and last door, a gesture which would have been not just futile but

dangerous in the heavy gravity, when it slid aside smoothly. Life-belt sensors carried a thick whine to them as powerful machinery shifted the massive door, fighting its inertia.

"Automatics?" Meyers asked rhetorically, regarding the dim interior with a professional's eye.

"Maybe," murmured McCoy, "though despite my first impressions I've got to admit it looks more and more like we're expected. After you, Spock," he said, gesturing.

Once past the door (which, Kirk was gratified to see, showed no inclination to close suddenly behind them), they found themselves in a long trapezoidal hallway. At regular intervals its walls and ceilings were lined with panels phosphorescent with orange light. It bent and wound confusingly, but the distance covered was less than it seemed (the gravity wearing on them again) before they emerged into a vast, brightly lit chamber.

The roof arched overhead, and the surrounding walls were filled with consoles and instrumentation as alien and unrecognizable as the material they were constructed of. Larger panels threw more light here, though it was still of that uniform orange hue. Kirk found the warm tint it lent to the metal furnishings very attractive, though it could never take the place of the familiar light of Earth's sun.

The greatest surprise, however, was not the instrumentation but the decor. On first glance, the chamber appeared to be lavishly landscaped, filled with strange bushes and small clusters of trees. McCoy had moved to feel the petals of a purple leafed growth, and drew back in surprise, apparently at the tactile sensation he received from the bush. For a fearful second Kirk thought the doctor had been stung.

"Are you hurt, Bones?"

"What? No, Jim, it's this thing." He glanced around at the other growths. "It's all of them, probably. The surface is cold . . . and hard. Hard as rock."

Kirk moved to stand alongside him, and regarded the construction. "Interesting . . . is it mineral sculpture, or what?"

Nearby, Spock was studying a taller specimen. "If so, Captain, the imitation is carried to remarkable extremes." He

gestured at the base of the tree-thing, where it disappeared into the open earth. "It seems to enter the ground, obviously drawing support from it. I wonder if it may not draw more than that."

"Oh, come on, Spock! It's stone, or something equally inorganic. Obviously it—"

A friendly, oddly prickling thought appeared abruptly in McCoy's mind—in all their minds.

"Nothing is obvious, everything is infinitely indeterminate," the thought explained sharply. "You look intensely, physician, but not well."

Kirk spun and glanced around the chamber. It still appeared deserted. "Where are you," he asked warily, adding almost as an afterthought, "man of Boqu?"

"Closer than you think, Captain Kirk."

One of the "trees" nearby started toward them.

Kirk found himself face to . . . well, to something, with one of the strangest creatures he had ever seen. By comparison, the bulky, limbless Lactrans appeared almost normal.

The being moved on a base two meters across, consisting of hundreds of long dark yellow limbs. Stiff and many-jointed, they rippled with an eerie clacking along the hard floor, like the march of millions of ants on a sheet of paper.

The centilimbs radiated from a thick central post twice as broad as a man's body, roughly circular in form, like an addled fence post. This main part was shaded a deep brown, almost the color of unpolished mahogany, and was veined with exterior vertical ribs of gold.

It rose in three jointed sections to the level of Kirk's nose, then tapered slightly before spreading out into a wide circular plate whose upper surface was plano-convex, like the upper half of the *Enterprise*'s primary hull.

The head, or such Kirk considered it, was a milky opaque crystalline substance resembling rutilated quartz. Black striations ran through it, bunching into dark nodules at various points within.

From the flat underside of the head, set several centimeters in from the fringe, dangled long articulated tentacles of dark

yellow. They were similar in shape and form to the hundreds of skittering feet projecting from the Boqus's base. They swayed and moved easily, under obvious control.

It was impossible to tell whether the expedition was facing the creature's front, back, or side, or indeed if such terms meant anything in regard to a Boqus. Equally, there was nothing faintly identifiable as a mouth, nose, eyes, ears, or anything else indicative of a face.

Kirk elected to regard the portion of the being facing him as its front. "I'm—" He cleared his throat, still recovering from the initial surprise of the Boqus's unmasking. "I am Captain James T. Kirk of the U.S.S. *Enterprise*. This is my first officer, Mr. Spock; my chief medical officer, Dr. McCoy; and sec—our vehicle pilot, Lieutenant Meyers."

This produced an agitated jangling of those dangling tentacles, and the creature seemed to draw back. Could he have made a mistake already, Kirk mused?

He had not. "Chief medical officer!" came the excited thought. "Then you have come in response to the prayers of the *animax*!"

"Prayers? Animax?" McCoy echoed in confusion. The Boqus's limbs relaxed, but its thoughts were still in turmoil.

"You have not come in response to our need, to end the epidemic?"

Kirk suddenly understood the reason behind the deserted metropolis they had passed over, and felt saddened as McCoy replied, "I'm truly sorry. We know nothing of any local epidemic."

The Boqus appeared to slump, and the opaqueness in its crystal skull increased until the striations within could no longer be seen.

"Why then," it inquired with sudden brisk curiosity, "have you come here? I cannot believe it was by accident."

That Kirk could sympathize with. Boqu was not a world the casual explorer would stumble upon. "We are here at the request of an ancient race acquainted with your people," he explained, "the people of Lactra."

"Lactra, Lactra," the uncertain thought reached them. "I know them not. I am old, visitors, yet this is something well

past my forming. Admitted it is that we Boqus are sadly lacking in methods of history and social record. We follow our past not as well as we ought to."

The suspicions brewing in McCoy's mind, temporarily interrupted when the Boqus had revealed himself, now surged back full strength, not to be denied.

"Jim, these bushes and trees around us—the Boqus himself—Spock's hesitation in classifying them was justified. They're not sculptured any more than you or I are sculptured." He rushed on, flushed with excitement. "We've long postulated the possibility of a living organism based on the silicon atom instead of carbon. Boqu . . . Boqu is a whole world based on that substance. A world of living crystal."

"I sense carefully concealed distaste in your mind, physician," came the thought from the creature before them. "Pity us not. It is we who have always been sorry for those we know of you. You poor carbon-based creatures, with your saggy, flexible, unrigid limbs. Your bodies lack discipline and form and true beauty.

"Even so, for all our inherent superior endurance to disease, we are not immune, it seems." The thought seemed to brighten in Kirk's mind, brighten with uncertain hope. "It is true you are a medical scientist, Bones McCoy?"

"I'm a doctor," McCoy replied readily. "My job's to make sick people unsick."

"Concise, yet thorough enough," came the response. "A great epidemic of tragic proportions has ravaged Boqu for many *nevars*. It is conceded among the surviving scientists that a new approach to a solution is required. We have despaired of ever finding one. Yet here you are."

"Now just a minute," began a cautious McCoy, but the Boqus rambled on.

"If you could find a cure for this devastation, you would gain the eternal gratitude of all the people of my world." Many limbs moved, indicating all directions simultaneously. "This is but one of many laboratories scattered about the surface of Boqu, isolated to protect those surviving scientists while they exhaust every means in the search for a solution. I was granted the opportunity of watching for an unlikely savior

from afar. It was I who signaled you with the light, and it was you who responded. I solicit your aid."

Everyone, it seemed, needed their help, Kirk thought. McCoy returned to his protest.

"I don't know how to cure a sick rock. I don't know the first thing about silicon biology."

"No one does, Doctor," pointed out Spock, "since until this moment such a thing was not thought to exist."

"However," McCoy added reluctantly, at the overpowering sense of desolation the Boqus projected, "I'm willing to try."

"No more than that could be asked," replied the Boqus ringingly. "I am Hivar the Toq, and will aid you . . ." The thought faded, to be unexpectedly replaced by a mental frown of contrition. "But you are here for another reason, at the request of these beings you call Lactrans. I cannot interfere with prior obligations."

"I don't think it will matter," Kirk informed him. "Matter of fact, the Lactrans are here to ask for *your* help."

"Poor help we can give now, for anything," Hivar the Toq confessed. "Yet I would hear the circumstances."

"The Lactrans," Kirk explained, "have made much of their world over into a great zoo, a collection of diverse life forms the inspection of which provides them with knowledge and pleasure. They wish to add one last creature to this assemblage, one creature they have failed to capture over the centuries. We were told that only your people possess the means to capture such a being, which they call a jawanda."

Hivar considered for a moment, its mind intent on unscrambling this new riddle.

"The creature your friends call the jawanda troubled Boqu for many *multinevars*," it finally informed them. "We have not had the need to control them since then, for they have learned to avoid us. Yet I have some knowledge of the means you speak of."

Kirk glanced to Spock, then McCoy. The Lactrans had been reluctant to divulge details of the jawanda, for reasons unknown. Perhaps true ignorance was the honest one; possibly the evasion was intentional. Regardless, Hivar the Toq apparently knew of the creatures. At the moment they

were in mental contact with the young Lactran, but out of immediate danger of Lactran attack. If there was a serious reason for this concealment of facts . . .

Kirk made his decision and asked hastily, "We're still not too sure what a jawanda is. If you could explain . . ."

No mental blast sent him writhing to the floor, but the Boqus didn't respond with an answer, either.

"I will bargain with you, Captain Kirk," Hivar announced, scuttling in small circles, "and with your friends of Lactra." Several crystalline tentacles pointed sharply at McCoy. "If your medical scientist Bones McCoy can discover a cure for the disease which plagues my people, then I will consult with the surviving guardians of the trust of science to see what can be done about the jawanda."

"Listen," McCoy objected, "I said I'd be willing to try. But I've no experience. Making our journey's success contingent upon my solving something which hasn't even been imagined until now just isn't fair."

"Somehow you must do more than try, medical scientist."

Kirk had the impression of a stone back being turned to them.

"Whatever you need will be provided instantly. We can expect no other visitors, for our signals have gone unheeded. Your presence is proof of that, since you are not here in response to them. We can expect no help beyond your own."

"How can you expect me, someone totally ignorant of your body chemistry, your very makeup, to succeed where your own best scientists have failed?" an exasperated McCoy wanted to know.

Hivar the Toq replied almost sullenly. "I do not know myself. I know only that a new approach offers the best remaining chance of a solution. Your very ignorance saves you from the misconceptions and false approaches which have stifled us."

"First time anyone ever complimented me for ignorance," McCoy grumbled. "I've got to forget four thousand years of biology and start from scratch."

"Does that mean you're convinced you can't do it, Bones?" wondered a concerned Kirk.

McCoy shook his head. "No. It means I'd better get started. Let's see . . . I'm going to need Nurse Chapel, and Ensigns M'baww and Prox to help with the beginning research, certain equipment . . . and I'm sure the Lactrans will have suggestions and instruments I'll have to learn about."

Kirk was studying the equipment set in consoles and banks throughout the chamber. "There's plenty to keep the rest of us occupied in the meantime, Bones. I don't think the Boquses will object to answering a few questions."

"We do not, Captain Kirk," Hivar the Toq admitted softly, "so long as there are any of us left to answer."

VIII

With the aid of Hivar and information relayed from various centers of research on Boqu, McCoy made progress which surprised him. It took two weeks to understand what the result of the disease was.

"I know what's happening to the Boqus now, Jim," he explained, "but as to the cause, I've no more idea than they do." He gazed helplessly around the small medical lab which had been set up in the shuttlecrawler, enabling him to work outside the constraints of a life-support belt.

He gestured toward a table laden with slides and instruments. It reminded Kirk of something familiar, yet elusive. His attention was taken by McCoy.

"Something is causing an alteration in the structure of the Boqus' upper parts, changing the chemical composition in such a way that death is inevitable. Imagine the blood in your veins suddenly petrifying and you'll have some idea of what's happening to Hivar and the others.

"I've spent days hunting for a way to attack this thing and, Jim, I don't have the faintest notion of how to begin. This is as alien to my experience as we are to the Boqus."

"I have a suggestion, Doctor McCoy," came a prickling inside their heads.

"Who's that, Spock?" Kirk asked.

"One of the Boquian scientists who has traveled many *nevars* to reach here," the first officer explained. "It has been observing us at work and has considered the situation. Our presence—our very existence—has given it an idea it wishes to propose."

"I'm all . . . whatever it is I'm supposed to listen with," McCoy announced.

"There is no need to tense, Doctor," soothed Spock. "The idea has been communicated to me to relay to you. It is suggested that since your function is the study and treatment of carbon-based forms, you consult with one of the many on

board the *Enterprise* who are experts in compounds of silicon."

"Spock," Kirk began, "we've already explained to them that life based on silicon instead of carbon is unknown—was unknown—to us until we came here. We have no one who—"

"Of course!" McCoy blurted unexpectedly. He ignored first Kirk's stare, then his query, as he hurried to the forward intercom. "*Enterprise*, *Enterprise*!" When no reply was immediately forthcoming, he stared angrily at the console. "Now what's the matter? Don't our maintenance techs realize that delays . . .!"

Spock quietly activated the communications unit for him and stood aside.

This time McCoy's entreaties were rewarded with a flood of static, as the communicator strove to force its way through dense atmosphere and the barrage of internal Boquian radiation.

"*Enterprise*, Lieutenant Uhura speaking. Is that you, Dr. McCoy?"

"Yes, Uhura. I want to speak to Lieutenant K'ang Te." He glanced at Spock as if for confirmation, and the first officer nodded readily.

Kirk searched his memory for one name out of the hundreds on board the *Enterprise*. K'ang Te, lieutenant; Sciences; head of the geology section.

Then he wondered why he hadn't thought of it. It had been a Boqus's turn to find a different approach . . .

With the veteran mineralogist's assistance, McCoy began to make progress—man and woman, physician and geologist, working together in search of a solution. Kirk watched them drive themselves mercilessly and wondered worriedly which they would find first—an answer, or total exhaustion.

It appeared to Kirk to be a dead heat between the two possibilities when McCoy, drawn from the work and the debilitating affect of hard labor under an extra half gravity, staggered onto the bridge a week and a day later.

"Bones, you look terrible!" Kirk exclaimed.

"I know. And I feel wonderful!"

"You—you did it, then? You actually found a solution?"

"K'ang Te and I, yes . . . At least, we think so."

Kirk looked past him. "Where is the lieutenant?"

"In Sick Bay, where I sent her." A hint of a smile graced the doctor's dry lips. "It's easy to prescribe treatment for someone when you're suffering the same symptoms." He sank gratefully into a seat vacated by Spock, too tired to counter the gesture with sarcasm—or too thankful for the small courtesy.

"I am certain the solution is as fascinating as the disease, Doctor," Spock ventured, by way of impelling McCoy to explanation.

"You don't know the tenth of it, Spock. The trouble was with their circulatory system—you ought to see it, Jim! Their blood, if we can call it that, is thicker than machine oil, and flows just fast enough to be called something better than paralyzed. In past centuries certain crucial components within the blood haven't been breaking down as they should have. Call it a buildup of impurities, if you will. The Boqus thought something in their own systems responsible for handling the breakdown of these impurities had failed, and they've been going slowly insane trying to discover it. We found it, but the real problem was finding an antidote." He shook his head slowly. "The Boqus were too close to the problem."

"As so often happens," Spock finished for him. "I am intrigued, Doctor. What kind of remedy did you discover capable of affecting the buildup of unwanted substances in the 'blood' of a silicon-based creature?"

"To begin with, Spock, I had to disregard, throw out, forget, and otherwise ignore everything I knew about serums and standard antidote chemistry. Not only did it seem unlikely I'd be able to find something the Boquian researchers had missed, but I wouldn't have the faintest idea of how to go about inoculating a rock—for all its stiffly formal mobility, I can't help thinking of Hivar and its kind in those terms. Our eventual solution came from medicine by way of physics, born out of mineralogy." He settled himself into a chair, lowering himself gently.

"According to their meteorological records, Boqu is periodically afflicted with long periods of constant storm. We nearly hit one of them on our way down—remember the tremendous lightning display?"

Both Kirk and Spock recalled that casually awesome discharge of energy clearly.

"After more experimentation and search than I care to think about, we discovered that in the case of this last series of storms, the cloud layer over most of inhabited Boqu had become so thick as to block out certain radiations from the system's feeble sun. This was accomplished by having Astrophysics prepare a complete breakdown of the radiation the sun was putting out, and comparing it with readings taken on the surface. From that point, we had to proceed with special caution. One of those screened-out wavelengths might be responsible for breaking down the unwanted substances in the Boqus' blood—but the others might prove lethal if too strong a dose was delivered."

He sighed slowly. "As it turned out, nothing of the sort happened, though that didn't keep all involved from worrying constantly about it. We tried four different radiants on several fatally ill Boqus. Two did nothing, the third made the experimental subject retch remarkably, and the fourth—the fourth had its subject on its, uh, feet in a few hours. Similar radiation treatments ought to have most of Boqu back to normal inside a month. The equipment involved is simple to reproduce. A technical team is on the surface now, helping them set up facilities for duplicating the proper projectors."

"Fascinating, Doctor," commented Spock with admiration. "I would enjoy a more detailed look into such a unique physiology."

McCoy's expression turned solemn. "That shouldn't be too hard a wish to fulfill, Spock. At present Boqu enjoys a surplus of corpses. They'd probably find the dissection of a Vulcan cadaver equally interesting."

"Undoubtedly," agreed the first officer, missing the irony of the doctor's statement completely.

Unexpectedly, McCoy grinned. He leaned his head on his left hand as he reminisced. "I don't think we'll ever see a Boqus jump. They're not constructed for leaping. But, Jim,

when that last patient suddenly showed signs of recovery and we knew we'd found the answer, Hivar and the Boqus medical scientists present came as near to kicking up their heels as their bodies permit."

"How long does the treatment last?" Kirk wanted to know.

McCoy considered. "Only about one of our weeks. So until the intensity of this severe storm cycle begins to lessen, every Boqus will have to spend about fifteen minutes a week under a radiation projector in order for its blood to return to normal —like humans used to do under sun lamps."

Spock looked querulous. " 'Sun lamp,' Captain?"

"An old obsession of people in the Dark Ages, Mr. Spock. Many of them used to spend hours, even days, under the concentrated radiation of an ultraviolet generator, trying to artificially darken their skin."

The first officer's confused expression did not fade. "I see, Captain. But I was under the impression that during that period of human history the humans with light-toned skin discriminated against the darker humans."

"That's right, Spock," Kirk admitted.

Spock's puzzlement deepened. "Then why would the light-skinned humans try to burn their skin dark? This is not logical, Captain."

"Human actions of the Dark Ages rarely were, Spock. As a matter of fact, I seem to recall that certain humans of dark skin used artificial means to try to lighten their skin."

"So the light-skinned humans tried to make their skins dark, and some of the dark-skinned humans tried to make theirs light?"

"You've got it, Spock."

The first officer assumed an air of finality. "I will never understand human beings fully, Captain."

"Don't worry about it, Spock," advised McCoy, for once in complete agreement with him, "you've got plenty of company. Actually, if you bother to consider that . . ." He stopped in mid-sentence, aware that the first officer was no longer listening. Instead, Spock's mind was drawn to something deeper.

"It is the Lactrans, Captain," he finally declared, confirming what the watching Kirk and McCoy had already suspected. "Though growing impatient, they applaud Dr. McCoy's ability and great talent in finding a solution to the Boquian epidemic."

"It's not a question of talent," an embarrassed McCoy muttered, "just persistence."

"I have so informed them," Spock added drily. "They wish to know if we have made inquiries among the Boqus for their help in locating and capturing a jawanda."

"They can ask our hosts themselves shortly." Kirk thumbed a switch on the chair arm, activating the intercom.

"Engineering," a familiar voice acknowledged.

"Scotty, this is the captain. How is that special tech section coming on those big life-support belts for the Lactrans?"

"I was about to call in myself, sir," the chief engineer told him. "They're undergoin' final tests. I think our guests will be pleased with them. No need to use the shuttlecrawler any more. It wasn't too difficult a job—even for us 'primitive types.' Just time-consumin'. They can even take 'em off and put 'em on themselves, with those flexible snouts of theirs."

"Thank you, Scotty. Kirk out." He turned back to the motionless Spock. "You can tell our friends they can describe jawanda-catching requirements to Hivar the Toq in person. Mr. Scott's people have built three specially modified life-support belts for them. They can beam down to the surface with us."

When they beamed down that afternoon, Kirk saw hints of tremendous activity in the direction of the formerly moribund city. On the nearest outskirts, crews of rejuvenated Boqus were at work in incomprehensible machinery, modifying certain structures, demolishing others, building still more.

Obviously, McCoy's antidote was already having extensive effects. Certainly, the captain thought as they made their way cautiously through the heavy gravity of Boqu, Hivar and its colleagues should now be overjoyed enough to provide all the aid the Lactrans desired.

Those three massive aliens were sliding along smoothly behind Kirk, Spock, and McCoy. The captain envied them their

ease of locomotion in the Boquian gravity.

At the moment they were deep in conversation among themselves, long front ends bobbing and weaving as they conversed at a speed which to human minds was only a confusing, head-throbbing blur. Enormous lightning flashes arced from thick clouds to ground off to the north.

"What are they so intent on, Mr. Spock?" his curiosity finally prompted him to ask. "The electrical display?"

"No, Captain." Kirk forced his way through thick, clinging mud that wasn't there. "The laboratory structure of Hivar the Toq." Kirk gazed at it, but saw nothing remarkable about the large building save its lack of windows.

"What about it intrigues them so?"

"The acuteness of its construction, Captain. It is all sharp angles and abutments, excepting the roof, whereas Lactran architecture is based on an absence of sharpness. Their buildings and machines, if you recall our stay on Lactra, were all rounded—curves, ovoids, hemispheres and circles. It seems that structure follows form. The Lactrans are as rounded as their constructs, the Boqus as sharp-edged as theirs."

"And what about us?" asked McCoy curiously. Spock paused a moment.

"We are considered acute formations by the Lactrans and curvilinear by the Boqus. It seems we partake of something of both."

"So we're mediators in form as well as in fact," noted Kirk. "It's nice to be consistent."

This time the last door of reflective metal was open, awaiting their arrival. Scott probably could have beamed them directly into the central chamber, but Kirk wanted Hivar to have time to prepare for their arrival—and it might prove useful to discover if the Lactrans could negotiate the building's passageways.

Nothing of the irritability mentioned in the Lactrans' old records was evident in the manner of Hivar the Toq as it greeted them warmly. The Lactrans studied the instrumentation and the layout of the circular laboratory with admiration.

The Boquian scientist had been taking McCoy's radiation treatments, and the change in its appearance was dramatic. The gold ribbing on its central trunk shone as if polished, Kirk observed immediately.

Even more striking was the difference in Hivar's upper region, the part that Kirk had come to think of as a head. Except for a few isolated patches of color, the opaque milkiness which had characterized that hemispheric crystalline structure on their first meeting was gone. Now the dark internal striations and peculiar clumps and nodes of denser material showed clearly, reminding Kirk of ferns and flies frozen in Earth's ancient amber.

It was a measure of this creature's personal strength, Kirk realized suddenly, that in all this time since their initial meeting Hivar had never once indicated that it was too severely stricken with radiation deficiency. Kirk wondered if he could have remained as personally unconcerned if their positions had been reversed—if he had been the one dying of a disease thought incurable and Hivar the possible savior.

"Greetings, Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, Doctor Bones McCoy." Kirk had the impression the Boqus was glancing behind them, though, try as he might, he could not identify Hivar's organs of sight. "And anxious visitors from our far past." Something scratched at Kirk's mind as the Lactrans and the Boqus exchanged silent mental hellos.

When it continued, he wondered for a nervous moment if something had gone wrong, if the Lactrans had touched some ancient trouble. Spock reassured him.

"According to the youngster, its parents and Hivar are engaged in parallel telepathic conversation of an advanced mode. I can believe that, as I have tried to listen in and have experienced only a mild mental concussion as a result. While the Lactrans must turn their thoughts to baby talk and slow their conceptualizations to a crawl in order for us to comprehend, no such restriction exists between them and the Boqus."

Whether Hivar the Toq sensed Kirk's uneasiness at being so completely left out of what was obviously a critical discussion or was just being polite, Kirk would never know. In any case, he appreciated it with loud thoughts of thanks when the

Boqus slowed its own river of conversation enough for the humans to make some sense of it.

"A jawanda you want to capture and take back with you to your home world? A jawanda!"

The Boqus' expression of surprise, coming when they had expected a more casual acknowledgment, left the humans startled.

"Now listen," McCoy began, "we've been put off about this jawanda long enough. I think it's about time we—"

Hivar the Toq pivoted on centilegs, the gesture of turning away from them more significant than anything else. "I promised you our aid, it is true, but . . . I do not know." It was muttering mentally. "Long ago we had a device for manipulating the jawandas. But this was used only to protect Boqu, to drive the creatures away from our world. Never to capture one!"

"Just a second, Hivar," McCoy interrupted, waving his hands. "Let's back up a minute. You said drive them *away* from *Boqu*?" The doctor eyed Kirk uncertainly, and was rewarded by a cautioning look of equal puzzlement. "Aren't the jawandas native to Boqu? Are you trying to tell us they originate on still another world?"

"None of the other planets of the system appeared capable of supporting even rudimentary life," Spock commented, without committing himself utterly. Perhaps some minor error in their initial hurried observations, some small factor of atmosphere overlooked . . .

"Do not tax yourself, friend Spock," came the answering thought from Hivar the Toq—accompanied, Kirk sensed with surprise, by a twinge of amusement. "It would appear that your friends the Lactrans have been less than informative, Captain Kirk."

Kirk turned his gaze on the always silent aliens. The answer to his unvoiced question came, as usual, from Spock.

"No, Captain, they have told us no untruths, they have not lied to us. They have simply neglected to mention certain details concerning the jawandas."

"I can imagine!" exclaimed McCoy feelingly.

"It is these details which they have not supplied which should be of particular interest to you, Captain," Hivar added helpfully. "I have said that we manipulated the jawandas out of necessity, to keep them clear of our world. This does not mean they come from another. We have never been able to determine the origin of the jawandas—if, indeed, such a term has application in their case. We know only where the jawandas exist . . . out there." Half a dozen reticulate upper tentacles pointed jerkily skyward.

"The jawanda is truly a creature of the universe," Hivar explained to a rapt audience of bipeds. "They live only in intergalactic space, drifting for unknowable eons in the gulf between galaxies. We know very little of their life, save that they are simple yet marvelously efficient energy-mass converters, feeding on the faint radiations extant in the vast Out There."

"If these creatures exist on radiation," Spock inquired, "why remain in the comparative barrens of intergalactic territory? Why do they not come nearer the galaxies themselves, and the suns which produce the radiations on which they feed?"

"Gravity," was the terse explanation. "Should a jawanda come within the influence of a modest sun, it could easily be trapped forever in orbit about it. While there is no reason for assuming that a jawanda could not live, even thrive, in such a confined existence, it seems that they prefer freedom to satiety. It may be a survival instinct or an actual mental preference—we likely shall never know. For whatever reason, they avoid the gravitational density of galaxies and star clusters. Only the isolation and weak pull of our star made them bold enough to come near Boqu."

"Why Boqu, though?" asked McCoy.

"Remember our measurements on approach, Doctor," Spock reminded him. "Boqu puts out more radiation than it absorbs, qualifying it in certain astronomical lexicons as a protostar itself."

"Correct, Mr. Spock," the Boquian scientist concurred. "Jawandas used to frolic freely about our world, successfully defying our sun's poor gravity. Normally, this troubled Boqu not at all. The jawandas' absorption of radiation lost freely to space did not affect us.

"Occasionally, however, it did, according to the old records. No, Dr. McCoy, the question I see framed in your mind is reasonable but not relevant. The jawandas did not screen out any particular radiation from our sun—such as the vital one you isolated as the cause of our epidemic. Instead, they blocked out a majority of radiation, that wavelength included. More important than any disease, this unpredictable screening caused slight but disconcerting shifts in the surface temperature of Boqu, lowering the warmth in the regions affected by substantial amounts."

"I can see where it could be uncomfortable to be enjoying warm weather one minute and having it turn to winter in a few seconds," Kirk admitted readily.

"This situation persisted for thousands of our years," Hivar continued, "until we found a way to drag the jawandas away. While doubtless they are dull, thoughtless creatures, they do seem capable of learning through repetition. They learned long ago not to approach Boqu."

Hivar abruptly went silent, and Kirk and McCoy looked to the attentive Spock. "The Lactrans wonder what has become of the mechanism for manipulating the jawandas and whether it can be adapted to serve their needs. Hivar has replied that it can conceive of no reason why the device should not be so utilized, though it has never been done before. The Boqus wished to drive the jawandas away, not capture them."

"I do not even know if the mechanism still exists, and, if so, whether it remains operative," Hivar broadcast mentally, slowed now so that the intensely curious humans could also listen in. "Should it prove so, you may employ it, though this must be done with care. Certain of the extended components of the mechanism hold a historical attraction for us. We would not wish to see them lost."

"What components?" Kirk wanted to know.

That great crystalline head turned toward him. "Boqu is circled by nine moons, Captain Kirk. For manipulating the jawandas properly it is necessary to make use of six of them."

"Six . . . moons." McCoy gulped, turning to the *Enterprise*'s first officer. "How big did they say one of these creatures is?"

"It has not been stated, Doctor. All references to size have been of an indeterminate nature."

"Big enough to live in intergalactic space, Bones," Kirk commented slowly. "Big enough to pass between sun and planet and cause climatic changes on the surface. Big enough to . . ." His voice trailed off, and he turned to face the Lactrans. "We gave our word to help. That agreement stands." He directed his final statement to Hivar. "Find the device. Can it be mounted on the *Enterprise*, or does it have to exist in free space?"

"No, Captain Kirk," the Boqus replied, bowing with surprising grace for so nearly inflexible a creature. "The actual console for controlling the confining elements of the mechanism is quite small. It will fit easily on board your vessel. As will I."

"You?" McCoy gaped at the scientist. "You're coming along?" Impressions of a mental nod of assent. "But why? You don't owe the Lactrans anything."

"Your guests, no . . . but you, Doctor McCoy, are owed a great deal. In any case, it is necessary, since only a Boqus could properly operate the mechanism."

The mysterious control console of the capture device turned out to be something of an anticlimax. Kirk had been prepared to have technicians cut out bulkheads and even cabins surrounding the Shuttlecraft Bay in order to provide a space large enough to accommodate a monstrous construction. As it turned out, the actual instrumentation bulked only about three times the size of the *Enterprise*'s navigation console. Hivar had found it in the nearby city housed in a huge old scientific warehouse that looked brand new, a testament to the foresight and talent of Boqu's pioneering engineers.

Hivar activated the ancient machine and spent several days replacing certain components and realigning internal components while Kirk fidgeted nervously on board the *Enterprise*, his sleep troubled by snaggle-toothed apparitions bigger than starships.

When, before long, the renovation was complete, Kirk inspected the incredibly dense machine and ordered the bracing beneath a bulk-cargo transporter reinforced before beaming the device aboard. He was trying to imagine where

they could conveniently place the machine—and how—when Spock proposed a solution so simple that Kirk had overlooked it.

"Why trouble to move it anywhere, Captain? Leave it where it is, on the transporter platform. If the Boqus can operate it from here, there's really no reason to shove it around the ship."

"How about communication?" Kirk mused, studying the distance between the transporter platform and the nearest intercom unit.

His first officer considered. "We will request that the young Lactran remain here with Hivar," he finally suggested. "The youngster will be in constant communication with its parents and with myself, on the bridge, as well as with Hivar."

"Boqus to Lactran to Vulcan," Kirk concluded, adding with firmness, "We'll keep all intercoms activated and open anyway."

When finally beamed aboard with the mechanism, Hivar reactivated it and pronounced itself satisfied with the arrangements. Pressed for a more precise translation than "mechanism" or "device," the Boqus scientist confessed it was unable to name it any better for his human hosts.

"At least that's in keeping with its appearance," Kirk murmured, staring at the object in question. It looked like a large blob of free-form slag composed of half a hundred materials, metallic and otherwise.

He studied the bumps and spikes and wires sticking out of the amorphous mass, trying to rationalize the haphazard appearance of the thing with the knowledge that it was an intricate, complex feat of alien engineering. There was slight consolation in the fact that it looked as absurd to the lumpish Lactrans as it did to him.

Duplicating the outward form of the thing would be no trouble, Kirk thought. Simply take a room full of engineering components and turn a low-power construction phaser on it. Several hours later you would have produced a close approximation of the object now squatting on the cargo-transporter platform.

As Hivar the Toq moved reflecting limbs across the mound's surface, however, it generated lights and hums and whines no half-welded dollop of metal could ever produce.

"The mechanism," the Boqus told them, "contains its own power source, which in turn links it with the much more powerful old engines locked into the crusts of the moons Drasid, Mett One and Mett Two, Lethiq, Lathoq, and Oj." It completed a few final adjustments, turned with a crystalline flourish to face them.

"All is in readiness, Captain Kirk."

An awkward moment of uncertainty followed, before Kirk finally replied, "You'll have to tell us how to begin." He glanced at the young Lactran, who showed no sign of providing instructions or suggestions. "No one else on board has any idea where to start looking for a jawanda."

"I expect your vessel possesses adequate equipment for the transmission of sound waves, since this is the method you use for personal communication," Hivar ventured. "Do you also have the ability to detect other types of electromagnetic radiation?"

"With considerable accuracy," Kirk informed it.

"Then there is no difficulty. Instruct your monitors of the appropriate instrumentation to listen for"—and Hivar provided a figure Spock understood—"which is the range of the jawandas' cry."

"Interesting," the first officer commented. "They communicate among themselves, then?"

"So it is believed by many," the Boqus acknowledged, "yet these sounds may be produced for a variety of reasons having little or nothing to do with communication. Should we continue outward from Boqu, away from the galaxy, we will eventually encounter one." A pause; then: "I see your confusion, Captain Kirk. Given the density of our atmosphere, how is it our knowledge of astronomy is so advanced? Let me say simply that our progress in what you might call radio astronomy and related areas which do not require visual observation has been substantial."

"That wasn't really what was bothering me," responded Kirk. "It was your use of the term 'eventually.' How long is

eventually?"

Hivar transmitted a mental shrug. "It could be tomorrow . . . or it might be a hundred years. I would tend toward the former."

"I sincerely hope you're right," declared Kirk with feeling.

Once back on the bridge, Kirk's first concern was that the complex telepathic communications system—which, after all, relied on an adolescent of an alien species—was functioning smoothly.

"Mr. Spock, what's the maximum acceleration Hivar's mechanism can match?"

Again the relaxation into semistupor, which no longer troubled Kirk; then the first officer replied, "Warp-three, Captain. Should we attempt to travel any faster, the six moons which form the bulk of the system will fall behind, soon to be lost to control."

Kirk nodded and glanced at the helm. "All ahead warp-three, Mr. Sulu."

"Ahead warp-three," came the acknowledgment. It was followed by a hesitant question: "On what course, sir?"

Kirk looked expectantly at Spock, who informed him, "Hivar says to use your own judgment, Captain. One course should prove as efficacious as the next, so long as we continue to move outward from our galaxy."

"Um. Mr. Sulu, resume our former course heading, continuing on out from Boqu."

"Aye, Captain," the helmsman replied unquestioningly.

Kirk's gaze went to the main viewscreen. It provided an expansive panorama of obsidian emptiness, speckled fretfully with the pale light of far-off galaxies and star clusters hundreds of thousands and millions of light-years distant.

Given the *Enterprise*'s marvelous instrumentation, of course, it was next to impossible for them to become lost. Even so, one could not be certain of anything this far from familiar starmarks. The idea of becoming lost in this benumbing nothingness, to wander forever on the fringes of the galaxy, was an eventuality he had no wish to cope with. Resolutely, the captain forced it from his mind.

There were other things to think about. Like the actual size of the mysterious jawanda, for example.

"Activate rear scanners, Mr. Arex," he ordered. The depressing view ahead was temporarily replaced by a shrinking Boqu aft. Raging upper-atmospheric disturbances stirred orange-and-maroon clouds like a giant's finger dipped in paint. And there was something else.

Six points of darkness, artificially highlighted by the ship's scanner-computers, were following them at a respectful distance. Six moons, detached from orbit, trailed the *Enterprise* like balls on a string. Kirk assumed that the long line was for convenience of manipulation. Surely the actual use of the moons in jawanda capture involved some more-complex configuration.

The lift doors slid aside, and McCoy strolled onto the bridge. "You'll be happy to know, Jim, that Lieutenant Randolph is fully recovered. I discharged her from Sick Bay an hour ago." His gaze went to the screen. "Our six attendant satellites?" Kirk nodded.

"I hope Hivar knows what it's doing with that archaic hunk of machinery." McCoy gestured at the trailing moons. "Even if they are all smaller than Luna, I'd hate for Hivar to make one of them zig when it should zag. If the *Enterprise* accidentally got caught between them, we'd end up looking about as streamlined as a Lactran."

IX

On the sixth day out from Boqu, Lieutenant Uhura turned from her communications console and informed Kirk, "I am receiving broadcasts in the range indicated by the Boquian scientist, Captain."

"You're certain, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir. Pickup is clearly within the frequency specified."

"Mr. Arex, obtain a fix on the broadcast source. As soon as you have it placed, instruct Mr. Sulu on the necessary alteration in our course for planned intercept."

"Very well, sir," the Edoan navigator replied.

Kirk glanced back at Uhura, intending to thank her—and hesitated. The lieutenant was chewing her lower lip, and she looked more than simply thoughtful.

"Something the matter, Uhura?"

"I don't think so, sir. It's just that . . . well, I'm sure I recognize those sounds. I've heard them before."

"That hardly seems likely, Lieutenant," commented Spock.

"I know, Mr. Spock," she admitted, "but I'm still positive I've encountered these particular noises in the past—or at least sounds very similar."

"Amplify and put them on the bridge speakers," Kirk decided.

She spent a moment adjusting the controls; then the bridge was filled with a moderate crackling sound. It alternated occasionally with a regular electronic chirp, which devolved rapidly into a low buzzing. One moment it sounded like random noise, the next almost like a programmed broadcast.

"My apology to Lieutenant Uhura," Spock finally said into the silence. "I recognize the sounds myself." Kirk was about to add that he also was familiar with such noise when Spock added, "I have communicated our discovery to Hivar, who is anxious to hear it."

"By all means. Uhura, transmit to the Bulk Transporter Room the Boqus is located in." There was a long wait.

"It is the cry of a jawanda," Spock announced, Hivar's own conviction mirrored in the first officer's tone.

Kirk was only confused further. "But that's a familiar sound, Mr. Spock. Large radiotelescopes, even the oldest ones on Earth, have been picking up buzzes and crackles like this one for hundreds of years. Of course," he added softly, "there are many whose origin has remained a mystery."

"Certain of those unsolved origins may now be explained, it seems," Spock went on, showing excitement of an intellectual sort even in his role of communicator. "It appears that in addition to quasars, pulsars, radio nebulae, and other known phenomena which are sources of deep-space radio waves, we must now include the jawanda."

"Proceeding on new course, Captain," Sulu announced, "warp-factor three."

Kirk had a sudden thought. "Mr. Spock, the Boquian mechanism restricts us to a maximum speed of warp-three. Ask Hivar how fast a jawanda can travel."

The reply took longer than usual. "No faster than our present velocity, Captain . . . or so it is believed. There is no way Hivar can say for certain, since its race was always concerned with putting distance between them and the jawanda and not closing it."

Kirk found himself once again trying to adjust to the idea of a creature which could move at a speed exceeding light. It made no sense—but then, the universe was full of things which did not make sense.

"Quarry is traveling at an angle to us, Captain. There is no indication that it has taken notice of our presence. We are proceeding on an intercept course which will bring us to capture range within twenty hours."

But it was a day longer before the extremely long-range visual sensors were able to pick anything up. There was a pause while Sulu adjusted instrumentation—and then they were gifted with their first sight of a jawanda.

It was all at once more magnificent and unexpected than Kirk had anticipated: an enormous rippling rectangular shape.

The sensors were observing it from its flat side; otherwise, as with Saturn's rings, there would have been almost nothing to see. Were it not for the fluorescent colors which ran rippling across its featureless surface, even the computer-enhanced visual pickups would have shown nothing. The dancing lights, radiation consumed and transformed, gave outline and dimension to the creature.

"Looks like a big plastic sheet trying to digest an aurora," McCoy offered.

"Details, Mr. Spock? Preliminary measurements?"

Spock was bent over readouts and indicators. "Its method of locomotion is unknown, Captain, though it appears to throw off energy as well as to absorb it. Thickness is apparently constant from one end to the other, with no significant tapering at either end."

"How thick, Mr. Spock?"

"Approximately one millimeter, Captain. Viewed from the side, even at close range, the creature would effectively vanish. By contrast, its length and breadth are considerable."

"You're starting to sound as vague as a Lactran, Spock," grumbled McCoy.

"It is difficult to estimate its surface area, Doctor."

"Why—because some of it appears edge on?"

"No—because there is so much of it, and because the rectangular appearance is only approximate." He looked up from his readouts and gazed straight at Kirk. "I would say that this particular specimen is capable of covering most of the North American continent on Earth . . . though, of course, only to a depth of one millimeter, and that assuming the continent to be uniformly flat. Actual surface area is concomitantly somewhat less."

"That's . . . all right, Spock," Kirk assured his first officer, when he had his voice back. "It's big enough for our needs—and the Lactrans'." He sat staring at the unimaginably huge creature. Electric purples, mauve, metallic green, and azure drifted through its nearly transparent vastness, the discharges ample evidence of continual energy transfer.

"As a collector of stray radiation, it is a wonderfully designed organism," commented an admiring Spock. "It

maximizes surface-collection area while minimizing mass. Absorbed radiation is converted into operating substance and at least two kinds of radiant discharge. One is the radio wave we detect, while the other doubtless propels it through the cosmos in some fashion we do not yet fathom. I would give ten years of my life to know how it does this."

"If we can capture it, the Lactrans may give you the chance to find out, Spock."

"Captain!" Kirk looked sharply at Sulu. "It's changing course."

"Spock, ask Hivar if we're within capture distance yet."

Quickly now: "No, Captain. Hivar says we must move considerably closer before the mechanism can be effectively employed."

Sulu spoke again. "Definitely senses us, sir—moving almost directly away from us now."

"Speed, Lieutenant?"

"Warp-three, sir."

Kirk rubbed tiredly at his forehead. "Can it sense a trap?"

"Most certainly it can detect the gravitational fields of the six moons trailing us, Captain," Spock pointed out.

"If that's the case, then we're going to have trouble getting close to any of the beasts." He considered a moment and decided, "Let's continue following for another half day. It may grow tired."

But as he made his way back to his cabin to sleep, he found himself skeptical of outlasting a being which existed comfortably in the space between galaxies . . .

Sure enough, when he returned to the bridge he found the jawanda still traveling with apparent ease at warp-three, directly away from them. They had not closed the distance by a meter.

The simplicity of the dilemma didn't lessen Kirk's frustration. If they accelerated to warp-four, they would overtake the fleeing quarry—but without the means necessary to capture it. And there was something else he was beginning to wonder about, something which intruded on his thoughts to the point

where he found it necessary to put the question to their guests, via Spock.

"Is a jawanda dangerous, Mr. Spock?"

"Hivar does not know, Captain, nor do the Lactrans. The Boquian mechanism was always operated from ground control, never from a ship. Hivar actually has no idea how a jawanda might react to one—particularly one moving free of the protection of a strong gravitational zone."

"I thought our guest considered it impolite to read thoughts," Kirk observed mildly.

"Hivar apologizes, Captain, but replies that the image in your mind was so strong it could not ignore it."

The image the Boqus was referring to involved Kirk's proposal to drop clear of the trailing moons and proceed at a higher speed to overtake the jawanda.

"Once we do that," Kirk concluded, "we'll have to find some way of turning the creature back toward the six satellites."

"Hivar is not certain," Spock relayed slowly, "that this is a good idea. Despite its apparent fragility, a jawanda remains a being of unknown defensive capabilities, but one through which courses a good deal of controlled energy. Hivar desires that its ignorance of such abilities not serve as a pretext for foolhardy action."

"I see. What is the Lactrans' opinion?"

"They are of a similar mind, though equally uncertain."

"Does any of them have any better ideas?"

A hopeful wait, after which Spock declared, "They do not, Captain. Free space is not the element of Boqus or Lactrans. It belongs to the jawanda—and, at present, to us far-ranging primitives. The Lactrans concede that you must make the decision."

"What of Hivar?" Kirk pressed, knowing that without the Boqus's cooperation further pursuit of the jawanda was useless.

"As Hivar can think of no alternative save to disengage and search for a jawanda at a more favorable intercept angle—"

"Which might not happen for that proverbial hundred years," Kirk pointed out sharply.

"—he consents, reluctantly, to follow your designated course of action."

"Tell him to break free of the six moons, then."

"He has already done so, Captain. He adds that—" but Kirk had no time now to listen to the cautions and concerns of Hivar the Toq, or the superior-minded Lactrans. Primitive creature or not, it had been given to him and his fellow savages to successfully bring to a conclusion this unique hunt.

For the first time since they'd left Lactra, he felt in complete command of his ship.

"Mr. Sulu!" he barked. "Mr. Arex! Compute new course to bring us around and in behind the jawanda." Both helmsmen and navigator rushed to comply.

Sulu looked back alertly moments later. "Course computed and laid in, sir."

"All ahead on new heading, warp-factor five," Kirk ordered.

Moving far faster than their quarry now, the *Enterprise* leaped ahead, circling in a great arc around the fleeting creature, the ship's powerful engine enabling it to all but vanish from the jawanda's immediate vicinity.

"Any indication it's detected us, Mr. Spock?" he finally asked when they were moving toward the creature instead of away from it. The *Enterprise*'s science officer studied the information fed back by long-range scanners.

"Apparently it has not changed direction, Captain. Either it is convinced we are still in pursuit, or it believes itself no longer threatened."

Distance shortened rapidly. "Reduce speed to warp-two, Mr. Sulu. Let's see if dropping to a velocity below its capabilities affects it."

"Still no change, Captain," reported Spock seconds later. "Coming directly toward us." A pause; then: "Hivar the Toq expresses some concern."

"Thank Hivar for its concern," replied Kirk, too busy now to worry about diplomatic niceties. "Slow to warp-factor one, Mr. Sulu."

"Slowing, Captain. I have visual contact." A quick adjustment and the jawanda appeared again on the

viewscreen forward. Only now the sparkling, rippling shape, a living microthin continent, was charging toward them at warp-three.

"It's beginning to slow, Captain," Sulu reported, a touch of anxiety in his voice. "Still coming toward us, though."

"Phasers on low power, Lieutenant."

"Phasers, sir?" the helmsman inquired uncertainly.

"That's right. We're going to try to turn it back toward the six moons of the Boquian mechanism. Fire as soon as it comes within range." If it comes within range, he added silently.

"Creature is slowing . . . warp-two . . . warp-one . . . range still decreasing . . . it's not going to turn or stop in time, sir."

"Fire, Mr. Sulu." Kirk leaned forward and gripped the arms of the command chair tightly. If they killed it, they'd have to begin another search.

"Firing," came the helmsman's even reply. Two dull blue beams jumped across the shrinking gap toward the onrushing monster, struck the ever-twisting surface . . . to no apparent effect.

"No indication of reaction from the jawanda, Captain," Spock informed him.

"Still coming at us, sir." Sulu looked back at the command chair for instructions.

"Increase phaser power to half strength, Mr. Sulu. Fire."

Once more the two beams, this time shining far more brightly in the darkness, crossed the space between ship and jawanda. It reacted this time, slowing even further—but for some reason Kirk felt that the decrease in velocity had nothing to do with the *Enterprise*'s attack.

It continued to rush toward them.

"Full power, Mr. Sulu!" he ordered hastily. All that could be seen ahead now was the lightninglike display of color rippling through the jawanda's substance as it transformed and dissipated untold energy with the ease of an earthworm digesting dirt.

This time the two beams which touched the creature were intense enough to blind, had not the ship's battle computer

automatically compensated for the anticipated brilliance by suitably adjusting the forward scanners.

Those two beams, striking with the full energy of the *Enterprise* behind them, were capable of piercing the thick hull of any vessel in existence, of reducing mountains to rubble and boiling away small seas. They struck the underside (or perhaps the topside) of the jawanda.

Flexible, incredibly tough cells contracted, reacted where the beams hit. That enormous surface curled like foil in five-hundred-kilometer-wide swirls.

But it did not stop, did not turn aside, and did not slow further.

"We're going to crash, Jim," McCoy murmured fatalistically, his fascinated gaze frozen on the viewscreen.

"All decks, red alert, Lieutenant Uhura. Brace for collision! Mr. Sulu, evasion course, warp-six—emergency gravity compensation!"

Engines operating near idle suddenly gulped great amounts of energy as abrupt demands were made on the ship's warp-drive units. The *Enterprise* shot forward to one side—three-quarters of a second too late.

A thin filament of jawanda, a living peninsula, caught the ship's secondary hull. It was a small extension of the creature—probably only a few hundred kilometers long and wide.

A gentle shudder went through the fabric of the ship. It was felt on the bridge, in the recreation rooms, in Engineering, throughout. One by one the exterior scanners went dim as they were covered by jawanda.

The body of the monster was so thin that at first the scanners could penetrate its substance. This lasted until the jawanda began to fold in on itself, burying the hull in more and more of its body, millimeter piling on millimeter, until the cruiser was completely enveloped in successive folds of jawanda.

"Slow again to warp-factor two, Mr. Sulu." The helmsman complied, but the action had no effect on the jawanda. It continued to turn in on itself, still only millimeters thick, but growing deeper and thicker, like sediment deposited by some

strange intergalactic stream. Total darkness soon showed on the screen as the jawanda's density finally grew impenetrable.

"I've seen a spider do the same thing to its prey," McCoy muttered, "wrapping it again and again in folds of silk. When it's finished, it bites through the silk and—"

"Don't arachnemorphize, Doctor," interrupted Spock.

McCoy blinked, his morbid visualizations temporarily shattered. "Don't *what*?"

"Don't ascribe spiderlike characteristics to an alien being."

"Captain?"

Kirk bent quickly to the intercom. "What is it, Scotty?"

"I dinna know for sure, sir. We're puttin' out as much power as usual, but for some reason it's not being utilized properly in the engines."

"Mr. Sulu," Kirk asked tightly, "what's our speed?"

"Warp-two, Captain . . . no, wait a minute." The helmsman studied his instruments in disbelief. "That is, we're supposed to be moving at warp-two—but we're not. In fact, we seem to be slowing!"

"I believe I know what is happening, Captain." Kirk looked over at Spock, could sense Vulcan mind-wheels turning rapidly. "The jawanda is an energy converter, and a remarkably efficient one. We are currently putting out a tremendous amount of radiant energy, compared to what it normally receives in the comparative emptiness of intergalactic space. This energy is highly concentrated, yet available without the threat of an attendant gravitational field. To the jawanda the *Enterprise* must seem a magical apparition of the greatest delicacy.

"Naturally, it wishes to maximize this unexpected new food source. By enveloping us in repeated folds of its absorbtive surface, it is logically attempting to contain all the radiant energy we produce, trying to prevent it from escaping into free space."

"Warp-factor one, Captain," came an excited voice from the speaker at Kirk's elbow. "Dilithium crystals showing stress patterns along interval cleavage planes," the chief engineer

added. "If we don't shut down the drive now, sir, we risk losin' any chance of reactivatin' it."

Suddenly the awesome depths of the intergalactic gulf were pressing intimately around Kirk's mind. The very possibility of becoming trapped out here, many light-years away from the outermost fringes of the Milky Way, let alone the Federation, was not pleasant to dwell upon.

"All right, Scotty, if you think it's that vital, shut down the converters. We'll use impulse power to maintain life-support functions only—and hope the jawanda isn't so starved it begins to drain that too."

"Aye, Captain."

Kirk heard him shouting commands to assistants and subordinates. His concern paramount, Scotty even forgot to sign off.

Kirk closed the open link to Engineering himself. A low whine rose in intensity for a brief moment, then faded to silence, the dying wheeze of an electronic zephyr. For an instant the lights on the bridge flickered confusedly before the changeover was complete. They brightened again, as strong as before, dimmer only in Kirk's anxious imagination.

"Any comments on our situation from our alien guests, Mr. Spock?" the captain inquired hopefully.

Spock listened and informed him, "Hivar the Toq had not considered the possibility that the ship's radiation might prove an attraction to the jawanda. Conversely, the Lactrans are delighted."

"Nice to know that the present predicament is pleasing to someone," McCoy murmured sardonically.

"They commend you on your speed in capturing one so easily and in such a subtle fashion, and wonder how soon we can begin the return journey to Lactra."

"That's fine, Spock, except our friends have things a bit mixed up. It's the jawanda who's captured us, not the other way around." Kirk thought several uncomplimentary things about Lactrans, for the moment not caring particularly if his emanations were detected. Still, he mused, their present troubles were not the fault of the Lactrans. Nor of Hivar the

Toq, whose knowledge of jawandas had admittedly extended no further than the atmosphere of Boqu.

"It is possible, Captain," Spock added, "that the creature will depart the *Enterprise* of its own accord, now that the main generator of radiation on board has been shut down. I do not think we should wait for this dubious eventuality. Somehow we must make it release the ship, at least long enough to permit us to get safely underway, at a speed sufficient to prevent a recurrence of the present awkward situation."

Awkward! McCoy shouted silently, amazed as ever at the first officer's capacity for understatement.

"It certainly can't worsen our difficulties to make the attempt, Spock," agreed a thoughtful Kirk. He studied the blanked-out scanners for a moment, then decided, "Let's take a firsthand look at what we're dealing with. Bones, you come too."

McCoy glanced at him curiously. " 'Come'? Come where, Jim?"

"Outside, of course. We can't tell very much about the jawanda from in here."

While McCoy gaped at Kirk, Spock wondered easily, "Shall I contact Chief Kyle, Captain?"

Kirk made a negative gesture. "No, Mr. Spock—no transporters. The creature could drain the power from the transporter as fast as it was renewed, though I don't think it would notice such a small output of channeled radiation. But I am concerned that the transporter beam might fail to penetrate the energy-sensitive substance of the creature's body. Remember what Hivar told us about its screening capabilities? Rather than take that indeterminate risk, we'll go out through one of the emergency-access ports—and hope the jawanda doesn't decide to suck the energy from our life-support belts."

Before long the three men found themselves standing within the lock of the emergency port nearest the bridge, on the upper section of the ship's primary hull.

"Activate life-support systems," Kirk ordered. Lime-yellow auras instantly enveloped them all. Kirk saw by McCoy's

approving nod that his own system was functioning properly. That slim yellowish halo was all that stood between them and the absolute cold of intergalactic space.

"Cycle the lock, Mr. Spock." The first officer touched the necessary switch, and the exterior door began to slide aside. Kirk felt a slight pull as the wisps of atmosphere missed by the ship's recyclers rushed out through the widening gap.

Looking out, he saw only the expected darkness. Yet there was something different about it. There should not have been a total absence of distant light, but there was.

Putting out an aura-shielded hand, he encountered resistance where none was expected. A slick rubbery wall sealed the lock exit, though the slickness was more imagined than felt, since his fingers did not actually make contact with the jawanda's body. Experimentally, he pushed. The dark material gave with surprising flexibility. Kirk had had no idea what to expect—something hard and resistant, perhaps, or soft like dark jelly. Instead, there was only this easily elastic smoothness.

For a moment he wondered if this was actually the body of their continent-sized nemesis. Then he jumped slightly as several small purple coruscations ran in uneven spurts across the living surface before them. The jawanda was sweating fire.

"Wonderful creature," Spock murmured.

"Let's admire it from a distance, Spock," suggested McCoy tersely. "What about trying a phaser on it, Jim?"

"Mr. Spock?" Kirk stepped back from the exit and regarded the dark substance expectantly as Spock removed the small hand phaser from his waist. The first officer set the beam on low power and directed it outward.

Blue light touched the black film blocking the doorway. Where it contacted the surface of the creature the material began to glow. The dark substance turned a light yellow at first. This melted rapidly into orange, then red, and finally into a rich purple. The mild assault was exquisitely beautiful and wholly ineffective.

"Try more power, Spock," Kirk advised. Spock did so, gradually adjusting the phaser until it was on maximum. The

intense emissions produced only a slight rippling in the jawanda's body, causing it to retreat outward about half a meter from the edge of the lock.

Of course, this could have been due to sheer enjoyment of the radiation bath as much as to discomfort or injury.

"That's enough, Mr. Spock," Kirk finally declared. The first officer flipped off the phaser and reset it on his waist. Kirk was only slightly disappointed. He hadn't really expected that the tiny phaser would be capable of threatening the enormous organism.

"It absorbs energy like a sponge, Captain," commented Spock.

"What about the ship's main phasers this close to it?" wondered McCoy.

Spock considered, "I think the effect would be essentially the same as before, Doctor: a futile waste of energy. There is so much jawanda to dissipate so little power . . . and it could put a severe strain on our already dangerously weakened power supply."

Kirk studied the blank wall of living material. The purple glow was fading slowly, contentedly. "What about the possibilities of a biological assault, Bones? Some sort of injection?"

McCoy almost laughed. "On a creature the size of North America? As thin as it is, I think it would handle the most massive dose I could give it the same way Spock says it would a blast from our main phasers—by dissipating it throughout its body. That's assuming I could concoct something able to affect its body. There doesn't appear to be anything remotely resembling a central nerve center, or even nerves. They might exist, but even if the creature allowed it, we could vivisect a few dozen kilometers and miss any vital points by a week's march.

"No, thanks, I'm not ready to tackle this. Give me a nice simple problem instead, like solving a Boquian epidemic." He gestured helplessly at the black film blockading the exit. "I'm sorry, Jim. but there's nothing I can do."

"Then that leaves one thing," Kirk said determinedly, "that we haven't tried." After double-checking to insure that the

gravity specifics of his life-support system were engaged, he walked forward, put both hands against the dark skin—and shoved hard.

The jawanda's body parted like a torn sheet, and Kirk's hands went right through.

Rather than expressing satisfaction, he sounded abashed. "We overlooked the obvious in favor of the technical. A common mistake of mechanically minded civilizations." Using his hands, he widened the gap. The substance resisted steadily, but continued to give way under the captain's firm pressure.

"Follow me." Stepping carefully through the hole, he walked out onto the surface of the jawanda.

They emerged facing rearward. Instead of the sloping back of the *Enterprise*'s primary hull, flanked by the two torpedo shapes of the warp-drive propulsion units, they saw only a black formlessness. It turned the streamlined cruiser into a dark nebula of constantly shifting outline.

A long tail like the back of a black comet stretched into the distance aft, glowing now and then with vibrant sparks and the random chromatic streaks of internal lightning.

"Wonder what we look like from a distance," McCoy murmured aloud, at once amazed and appalled by the sight.

"The cape of some fantastic giant," Kirk hypothesized, "or the image of legended Azathoth . . . We've become a child's dream, Bones."

"Or its nightmare," McCoy countered.

"It is conceivable," Spock ventured, refusing to be drawn into such useless, illogical speculation, "that by utilizing the manual labor of the entire ship's complement we could physically remove the creature from the hull. However, this would prove futile in the end, since there is no way to prevent it from reestablishing itself once all hands have returned inside."

"I dislike the thought of totally abandoning the ship to automatics, even for a few minutes," Kirk added as they made their way across the black substance. It rippled eerily underfoot wherever an aura-clad boot touched down, like concentric circles fleeing a stone flung into a pond.

Kirk put a foot down with experimental firmness, then raised it quickly. Gently the material reformed itself over the exposed circlet of metal, apparently undamaged. Leaning over, he peered intently at the dark flesh, but could detect nothing resembling a seam or repaired wound.

"Remarkably efficient in all ways," Spock declared, also studying the area where Kirk's foot had pressed down.

"Yes. It seems to—" He broke off, staring rearward.

"What is it, Jim?" a worried McCoy inquired.

"Is it my imagination, Bones, or is the jawanda starting to move?"

McCoy looked around, and even as he watched the activity Kirk thought he had sensed increased visibility. "No, I see it too, Jim."

At the edges the colossal mass seemed to be rippling and fluttering with great violence. A moment later their life-support belts reacted to similar action underfoot, keeping the men firmly attached to the immediate surface beneath them as it too began to move up and down in increasingly higher arcs.

"Captain, I think it best that we reenter the ship, at least until this sudden activity subsides."

"You won't get any argument from me, Spock," admitted Kirk readily. He was already moving as fast as possible back toward the open hatchway. Despite the knowledge that the life-support systems would hold them tight to the jawanda, he had to fight down an urge to drop flat and hug the surface.

"Why do you think it's reacting like this, Spock?"

"There may be any number of reasons, Captain," the first officer responded, a smooth thrust of body-substance sending him arching meters above Kirk and McCoy. Then Spock had dropped into a low pit and they were looking down at him.

"Possibly it is irritated by our presence, though I think that unlikely. It may be seeking to realign itself to further maximize its energy gathering potential. Or . . ." He paused. "It is possible that, with the ship's warp-drive units deactivated, the reason for its enveloping the *Enterprise*—to be wrapped tightly about a source of intense and now vanished radiation—has disappeared. It may be preparing to leave."

"Then I suggest we hurry," advised McCoy, exercising a bit of understatement himself as he increased his pace.

After another couple of minutes had passed, Kirk slowed his progress across the rolling surface. Frowning, he muttered, "We should have reached the hatchway by now." Turning in a slow circle, he examined the living terrain behind them. All was shifting, hilly blackness. No comforting light showed through.

"As a matter of fact, how are we going to relocate it? The jawanda is so dense now that the light from the lock can't penetrate it."

There was silence, each man wrapped in his own thoughts. Then McCoy said hesitantly, pointing, "I think it was over that way, Jim."

Slowly they retraced what they hoped had been their original steps—slowly so that they wouldn't overrun the lock entrance, and also because the jawanda was now heaving up and down in twenty-meter-high ripples. Only plenty of experience working in low-g environments kept them from becoming violently ill.

After five minutes McCoy had to admit that his guess had been wrong. Kirk and Spock were equally disoriented.

"It is imperative that we do not continue to search blindly about, Captain," Spock declared, his even, controlled tones a great comfort in the fleshy chaos heaving around them. "I believe we must risk the utilization of transporter energy to have ourselves beamed back into the ship. So long as the jawanda remains attached to the hull, we will never locate the open lock."

"I agree," McCoy added quickly, the distant glow of the Milky Way galaxy bobbing drunkenly behind them. "Even though the creature hasn't threatened us, I don't like the idea of being stuck out here as our life-support charges run down."

"We don't know for certain that the jawanda is harmless, Doctor," Spock observed coolly, not enhancing McCoy's current state of mind.

Kirk nodded his assent to Spock, who removed his communicator from his waist and flipped it open. His words

carried to his two companions as he addressed the open speaker grid.

"Spock to Main Transporter Room, Spock to Main Transporter Room." There was a silent pause. The first officer looked across at Kirk. "Acknowledge, Transporter Room." Still no reply. "Nothing, Captain—not even normal background noise."

"Maybe your communicator is malfunctioning, Spock," Kirk suggested. Reaching down, he opened his own instrument. "This is the captain speaking. Transporter Room . . . bridge . . . anyone receiving, please acknowledge." Only the emptiness of space sounded from the tiny grid.

"I should have guessed," Spock broke in, in his own quiet way furious with himself. "Naturally the energy-screening abilities of the jawanda blocks out the weak waves produced by our communicators. There is only—"

Despite superhuman balance, he lurched forward as the surface moved beneath them. Kirk nearly fell backward, and McCoy tumbled flat.

The jawanda, its primary source of radiation now completely cut off, was once again feeling the need to spread its energy-gathering bulk as wide as possible to gather the stray radiation drifting across the intergalactic gulf. The violent contraction which had thrown everyone off balance was caused by the creature's beginning to separate from the *Enterprise*.

Kirk fought to keep from screaming in panic as the star-field wheeled crazily around them. The energy-eater finally straightened out, having unwound itself from the hull.

Looking back, Kirk saw the *Enterprise* behind them. It was shrinking at a terrifying pace at the tail end of a vast dark carpet.

Ahead of them lay nothing but black infinity . . .

X

Kirk rolled over and managed to sit up. "Communicators, Spock. There's nothing to screen them out now." But his first officer was already reaching for the compact instrument, flipping the top open.

"Spock to *Enterprise*, Spock to *Enterprise* . . . Come in, *Enterprise*."

A faint voice barely recognizable as that of the ship's helmsman issued from the speaker, weak with increasing distance and distorted by the crackle of radiant discharge from the jawanda beneath them.

"Mr. Spock . . . what's happened? Our scanners are operating again. The jawanda has broken free and—"

"Transport us back aboard, Mr. Sulu," Spock interrupted urgently. "Immediately."

"What's that, Mr. Spock? I can't . . ." There was a burst of static. ". . . quite hear you." Dimly they heard, "Sensors seem to indicate you are no longer on the ship's hull. What—"

"Activate engines!" Spock ordered crisply. "Follow the jawanda and overtake. We are stranded on the jawanda, repeat, *on the jawanda.* It is moving out of visual range. We are—"

"Never mind, Spock," McCoy advised, an odd tinge in his voice, "they can't hear us any more."

But Spock persisted, his voice never breaking as he continued broadcasting. Rapidly the *Enterprise* became a shapeless dot, then a star . . . and soon was lost to sight as the jawanda sped away at a rate no living creature should have been able to attain.

Three men more isolated than any in the universe sat themselves with unnatural calm on the thin surface of their unbelievable steed and took stock of their situation.

It was not promising.

"We are fairly sure the *Enterprise* is faster than the jawanda," Spock noted, "but it must get underway rapidly in order to be able to track us." Glancing to the side, he saw the vast circle of the home galaxy dominating the darkness like a gigantic pinwheel.

"Even if they temporarily lose contact with us," McCoy pointed out, with more confidence than he felt, "they ought to be able to pick up the energy field surrounding the creature. We located it in empty space once before, by the sound it emits. No reason why Sulu and Uhura shouldn't be able to do it again." He essayed a timorous smile.

"All very true, Doctor," an almost but not quite shaky Vulcan voice agreed, "unless the ship's instrumentation locks onto *another* of the creatures. If that happens and the ship follows a different jawanda for even a short while, we could be carried far beyond easy sensor range."

"Thanks, Spock," McCoy muttered morosely. "I can always depend on you to cheer me up." Absently he ran a hand over the smooth obsidian film beneath them. Glowing phosphorescence trailed his hand, like the night wake produced by a boat traveling one of Earth's oceans. "I've been marooned on several worlds and a few moons before, but never on a living creature."

"We've discovered a flying carpet that would astound humanity's ancient story-tellers," Kirk mused. "I wonder where it's carrying us."

It was amazing, he reflected, how rapidly he had adjusted to the possibility they might never be found. At least they would die in space, and quickly, when the energy powering their life-support belts gave out or was drained away by the jawanda. His gaze moved again to the lambent spiral of the Milky Way. A more fitting subject for the final sight of a starship captain could not be imagined . . .

As had so often been the case in times past, Captain Kirk's resignation proved premature. Spock had been standing rigid for long moments, almost at attention. When he spoke again, his voice was relaxed.

"There is no need for concern any longer, Captain. The *Enterprise* is tracking us."

McCoy scrambled to his feet, and together he and Kirk stared rearward—or at least in the direction Spock was facing; it was impossible to determine true direction. Kirk strained, could see nothing but distant star clusters and nebulae, not even a moving point which might turn out to be the ship.

"How can you tell, Spock? I can't make out a thing."

"I am in communication with one on board. The connection at this distance is tenuous, but with no other intelligent minds around us—"

"The Lactrans!" McCoy exclaimed.

"Yes, the Lactrans," Spock confirmed. "While they have been unable to assist in the capture of the jawanda, it seems that their presence has produced an unexpected but welcome benefit. The young one is in communication with its parents, who relay instructions through it to Mr. Sulu and Mr. Arex."

Shortly thereafter the most beautiful sight in the universe hove into view: the *Enterprise*. It grew to the size of a small flower and finally loomed huge behind them.

Or perhaps now it was before them, since they seemed to be rushing toward it. Kirk studied the ship as the first fold of jawanda reached outward. Spock's comment mirrored his own thoughts.

"The creature is once more rushing at the *Enterprise*, sensing the nearness of renewed radiation from her engines."

Behind them, a towering black wave was curling overhead, arcing downward like an onyx tsunami. It blotted out the bright glow of the home galaxy, surged ahead and downward. All three men had to fight down an unusual tendency to claustrophobia as the black curtain descended on them. No crushing weight shoved them flat as they hurried toward the nearing hull. The blackness settled with feathery lightness. Each time a new fold of jawanda curled over them, they pushed upward with stiff arms and forced a temporary gap in the creature's body, emerging into the starlight again and again.

Finally the jawanda stopped wrapping itself about the ship. They found themselves standing once more on a black-coated hull, unable to recognize a single feature through the amorphous structure of the creature.

"We're right back where we started," McCoy observed, sighing heavily. "I can't say I'm disappointed."

"On the contrary, Doctor, we are not back where we started," objected Spock. "I am still in contact with the Lactrans." Turning slowly, he faced toward the front of the ship and pointed. "That way."

Following the first officer's lead, they walked over to an area which looked no different from any other, or from the one they'd just left. Spock gestured slightly ahead and down. "We're here, Captain."

Kneeling uncertainly, Kirk reached out and shoved with both hands. Once again the multiple folds of jawanda parted—but this time a gleam appeared in the opening thus produced. It was the most welcome sight Kirk had seen in a long time.

Widening the gap with his hands and with McCoy's help, they were soon able to slip back into the comforting closeness of the emergency lock. Undamaged, the jawanda reformed behind them, shutting out the universe once more.

Spock activated the lock and it cycled shut behind them. Atmosphere was automatically pumped into the chamber as soon as the airtight telltale went on, and the all-clear sounded a second later. Gratefully, Kirk deactivated his life-support belt, as did Spock and McCoy. The doctor opened the inner door.

A large, cylindrical mass the color of lead filled the corridor beyond. Kirk still could not tell when the young Lactran was standing or sitting—or if those terms had any referent to Lactrans. He had the impression that the youthful alien was regarding them attentively.

"It apologizes, Captain," Spock announced.

"Apologizes?" Kirk wondered if the surprise was as clear in his mind as it was in his voice. "Its parents just saved our lives." He returned the creature's eyeless stare. "We are more grateful than we can—"

"Nevertheless, it persists in its apologetic attitude, Captain. The sudden disengagement of the jawanda which carried us away from the ship caught it and its parents by surprise."

"They weren't the only ones," Kirk countered feelingly.

"They are sorry for the delay incurred in directing the ship to us, and hope that our simple minds have not suffered any

damage as a result of this negligence."

"Tell them our primitive cognitive apparatus is functioning normally," Kirk replied with a grin. "If they hadn't acted when they did, we wouldn't be functioning at all."

Making a strange weaving motion with its multiple-digited front end, the Lactran adolescent turned and scuttled off down the corridor.

"It begs to be excused, Captain. It wishes to visit its parents. The strain involved in reaching across such a distance has weakened them. We must return to the hunt, they insist—with the foreknowledge that this time they may not be able to help us."

"From now on we're going to stay inside the ship," declared McCoy. "You can tell them that, Spock." He turned to Kirk. "What now, Jim?" he asked as he set his life-support belt in its proper rack, making sure the recharge light was on.

"Back to the Bridge, Bones. From there . . . I don't know. Any ideas?"

Neither McCoy nor Spock had come up with the hoped-for miracle solution by the time the turbolift deposited them on the bridge. Kirk acknowledged the warm yet restrained welcomes of the crew as Spock moved to his science station. McCoy relaxed nearby.

"I have a small theory, Captain," Spock announced, sitting down in his chair.

"Pursue it, Mr. Spock." The first officer's theories often turned out to be more solidly grounded than many supposed facts. Spock bent to the library-computer console with a will.

Glancing at the main viewscreen, Kirk was rewarded with the expected picture of dull blackness occasionally enlivened by scratchy streaks of maroon-and-emerald lightning.

"Status, Mr. Sulu?"

This time it was not necessary for the helmsman to check his instrumentation. "The jawanda has once more enveloped the *Enterprise*, Captain. As soon as we learned that you were safely back aboard, Mr. Scott deactivated the drive again." Sulu gazed uncertainly back at him. "What do we try now, sir?"

"I don't know, Lieutenant." Kirk considered. "For our purposes the creature reacts favorably to physical pressure, but I can't have hundreds of people out on the hull shoving and pushing. Energy weapons are useless against it—in fact, they probably strengthen it. A photon torpedo might have some effect, but we can't very well explode one against the creature when its body is only millimeters from the ship. Besides, we want to capture it whole, not chop it to pieces. The devil of it is, we have the jawanda right where we want it. Only we can't use the warp-drive engines to carry it and ourselves back to Lactra."

"A moment, Captain," Spock requested, as Kirk was trying to think of a way to utilize the jawanda's docility under physical pressure. The first officer was bent over the main readout from the library-computer console.

"I am concluding certain calculations. There." He looked up, staring for a moment into nothingness, before turning to Kirk and informing him, "The Lactrans also believe the idea is feasible, though dangerous. They refuse to support or to reject the proposal."

"What proposal?" Kirk wondered guardedly.

"To impel the jawanda to release us by providing too much of what it wants. In a word, we shall appeal to its sense of gluttony."

"I'm not sure I understand what you're driving at, Spock."

"Consider, Captain. When we collided with the creature we were moving, according to final readout, at warp-four, coming up to warp-six, which we never fully attained. If we suddenly fed a sustained burst of emergency power to the engines, the equivalent of warp-factor seven or eight, it is possible that the surfeit of energy—of food—would dangerously strain the creature's absorptive capacities.

"It would have two choices: to burst from overconsumption or abandon its hold on the *Enterprise*. If the former happens, we will at least be free to search for another jawanda, with our knowledge of its abilities and habits enlarged. If the latter, we may be able to engage the Boquian mechanism before the engorged creature can escape."

"It sounds good," admitted McCoy hopefully. "Why are the Lactrans leery of trying it?"

"Their reasons are twofold, Doctor. Should the jawanda *not* be overloaded by the surge of energy, we run the risk as stated by Engineer Scott of losing our warp-drive capability altogether. This would leave us with only impulse power on which to recross a considerable amount of space." His gaze momentarily checked a figure displayed on one of the science station's several screens.

"On impulse power it would take us approximately three hundred and sixty-five standard years to reach the outskirts of our galaxy, with the Federation a good deal farther away. That is assuming the engine components last that long."

"Let's hope we don't have to try it," Kirk said. "What about our guests' other concern?"

"It has already been mentioned, Captain," Spock declared. "They worry about damage to the specimen."

Kirk forbore formulating his first thoughts. It wouldn't do to insult someone who had just saved your life.

"Any other proposals, Spock?" he asked, hoping for an alternative that carried less of an air of finality.

"I am afraid not, Captain. This course of action seems to offer our best hope of breaking clear."

Kirk sighed and activated the armchair pickup. "Engineering?"

"Scott here. What is it, Captain?"

"Scotty, this creature drinks radiant energy. Since we can't pull away from it, we're going to have to try to convince it to let us go—by generating a cosmic bellyache. Somehow we've got to overfeed it. I'm going to want maximum emergency power from the converters for as long as you can provide it."

"Aye, Captain," the chief engineer assented reluctantly. "I dinna know how long we can maintain it, the way that monster drains our production."

"We want it to drain us, Scotty—until it's sick of it. Keep the converters functioning for as long as you can. This *has* to work."

"I understand, Captain," Scott replied solemnly. "Engineerin' out."

Kirk clicked off and looked forward. "Mr. Arex?" The Edoan navigator acknowledged, his bony-ridged skull turning three soulful eyes on the captain.

"Yes, sir?"

"If we do succeed in breaking free of the creature, we're going to want to come back for it . . . monumental pain in the stern that it's been. We're liable to break completely free at warp-seven or warp-eight, so you'll have to try to retain a position fix on it."

"I'll manage, Captain."

"I know you will, Mr. Arex." He studied first the living dark matter covering the scanner, then the viewscreen, while searching for a flaw in Spock's reasoning and finding none. How many times, he mused, had he found himself betting his existence and that of his crew on a cut of the deck by Fate. *His* record for turning up aces was unblemished . . . so far. It was time again to try to extend the streak: "Mr. Sulu, all ahead warp-factor seven, emergency power."

"Engaged, Captain," came the response from the helm.

A steady whine began to sound, more felt than audible. It rose to a pitch just shy of setting everyone's teeth on edge, then held steady. Instead of the normal rush of lights across the screen, they continued to see only blackness. A minute passed, two, three . . . Angry jagged bolts of crimson and gold began to race bizarrely through that living film. Four minutes, five . . .

"It doesn't seem to be having any effect, Captain," Spock reported calmly, his gaze locked to the gooseneck viewer. "The jawanda is still wrapped completely around us."

"Increase to maximum emergency overdrive, Mr. Sulu," Kirk said. "Warp-factor eight."

Sulu hesitated the briefest instant, started to look backward, then murmured a tight "Yes, sir" instead.

The whine became a painful drone like the keening of a single gigantic bee. Kirk felt a faint throb through the metal structure of the command chair as the ship's fabric sought to

remain intact under the enormous energies generated by her engines.

Six minutes, seven, eight . . . a voice shouting from the intercom, barely recognizable, "Captain, we canna hold this much longer! Converters are beginnin' to fail."

"Warp-factor seven, sir," Sulu suddenly announced. "Warp-factor six, five . . ."

Kirk snapped at the intercom, "Scotty, maintain full emergency power! Never mind protecting the converters now, we need everything you can—"

"That's what we're givin', Captain," the chief engineer countered. "I'm tryin' to tell you—the energy's not bein' translated into thrust. That thing's sucking up everything we can generate and searching for more."

"Warp-factor four," Sulu declared worriedly. The bone-grating whine of emergency overdrive had long since faded, along with its comforting throb of power.

"We must make a final decision immediately, Captain," exclaimed an anxious Spock, "or the converters will permanently collapse."

Kirk's gaze was fixed on the viewscreen, fascinated by the now continual display of lightning so brilliant the battle compensators were hard pressed to sop the intensity to below pain threshold. Every hue of the rainbow was present in those unending discharges as the jawanda fought to dissipate surplus energy. Kirk wished he could be floating free in space nearby. The trailing cometlike portion of the jawanda must present a spectacular sight. Indeed, an unsuspecting observer who chanced to pass through the immediate spatial vicinity would see jawanda and *Enterprise* as a colossal oblate opal, lit with internal fire.

Kirk was about to order an end to the seemingly futile effort when the colors vanished, revealing the far plainer but much more welcome isolated lights of distant galaxies pin-wheeling through the gulf.

"We're clear!" McCoy yelped joyously.

"Disengagement confirmed, Doctor," concurred Spock, considerably less exuberantly. "It worked . . . barely."

"The creature is falling rapidly off screen astern, sir," Arex announced, in a tone almost as relaxed as Spock's.

"Warp-factor five," Sulu declared, "factor six and increasing."

"Reduce speed to warp-four, Mr. Sulu!" Kirk ordered quickly. "Don't lose our quarry, Mr. Arex."

"Not to worry, Captain," the navigator assured him, examining his own sensor readouts. "It is now by far the most obvious object in the heavens, due to the amount of energy it continues to radiate."

"Plot a return curve to bring us directly back at the creature, Mr. Arex. We can't waste time and allow it to regain its flexibility in converting energy." He voiced a quick question to the arm pickup: "Scotty—how are the engines?"

"Recoverin' rapidly, Captain," the chief engineer reported, the strain of the last minutes evident in his voice, "but it was a near thing. I wouldn't like to chance it again."

"We're going to do our best not to, Scotty," the Captain assured him, before clicking off. His stare moved repeatedly from helm to viewscreen. "What about the jawanda, Mr. Arex? Is it trying to escape?"

"It does not appear to be succeeding, if such is its intention, sir," the Edoan announced carefully. "It is moving away from us, but very slowly, and in an erratic manner."

"Bloated," McCoy decided firmly. "The overload was too much for its converters to handle. I'd venture to say that its whole system has been affected."

"The Lactrans," Spock put in, gazing momentarily at the wall before him, "hope there is no permanent damage."

"We do too," admitted Kirk, "so long as the alternative doesn't turn out to be rapid recovery."

"It is continuing to move away, Captain," Arex said softly, "but more slowly now."

"Sensors indicate it is discharging energy at an incredible rate, Captain," declared Spock. "It may be regaining some of its ability."

"I wonder—Spock, do you think it's capable of anger?"

"I don't know, Captain. But the instinct to defend oneself is basic to many very primitive organisms." He eyed Kirk expectantly. "You have something in mind?"

"Somehow, Spock, we have to distract it long enough for Hivar to engage the capture mechanism. If the creature doesn't actually conceive of us as a threat, it should at least regard the ship as a challenge. By now it should be dazed and disoriented—its present movements indicate that. I can only see one way to draw it within range of the Boquian device—and that's to tempt it into chasing us."

"Jim!" McCoy exclaimed, startled. "If it manages to envelop us again . . ."

"I know it's a risk, Bones, but we've got full motive power back. We'll have to cut it close, but if it gets too close we can outspurt it at the last moment." I hope, he added silently.

Spock helped him make up his mind. "I agree it should be tried, Captain."

"What do the Lactrans think?"

Spock listened silently. "They are agreeable to anything which has as its final purpose the capture of a jawanda."

"Good. Mr. Sulu, slow our speed gradually. I want it to look like we're having trouble of our own."

"Slowing, Captain," the helmsman responded. "Should I notify Engineering?"

Kirk considered and half smiled as he replied, "Better not, Lieutenant. I can guess Chief Scott's picturesque opinion of this idea." He became all seriousness again as a pulsing spot appeared on the viewscreen, an object the size of his thumbnail, a seething pool of color.

Fat and sassy, he thought. Probably thickened its waistline by an enormous amount—maybe even another whole millimeter. If the monster had the instincts of an amoeba, it should be spoiling to defend itself against anything that smacked of an attack—particularly an attack by a source of food. Still, the jawanda's ability to relieve itself of excess energy remained an unknown, unmeasurable factor. As important as the time factor was, they would have to proceed with caution.

"Speed of target, Mr. Arex?"

"Still moving away from us, Captain, approximately warp-factor one point two two."

"Spock, we're counting on its reacting like any other living organism, but we still have no idea how advanced it really is. Any chance it could be intelligent?" That, he thought, might complicate events considerably.

"I doubt it, Captain," the first officer declared, glancing up from his instrumentation. "Its instincts should be quite primitive. It gives every indication of existing only to perform three basal functions: eating, excreting, and reproducing."

"I agree. It better . . . I'm tired of surprises, especially potentially lethal ones. Is Hivar the Toq ready?"

Spock paused. "The Boqus is standing by its equipment, Captain. All elements of the mechanism are in readiness."

"Position?"

"Still too far away." Not that Kirk had expected any other reply—they would have to draw the dazed jawanda into the trap.

"Captain!" Kirk looked back to Arex. "The creature is turning. It has reversed its direction and is now moving toward us."

"Mr. Sulu, you are aware of the position of the Boquian mechanism?" Kirk inquired hurriedly. The helmsman nodded confirmation. "Change course then, to take us through its center. Continue to slow speed toward warp-factor one."

"Coming about, sir . . . slowing."

Long minutes passed, while the jawanda, its thin body still blazing with all the fury of a translucent reactor, expanded on the screen with startling speed. The reason was evident: The *Enterprise* had to change course in a wide curve, while the jawanda had simply folded in on itself, in effect going instantly into reverse.

"It's closing on us, sir," Sulu announced. "Coming on at warp-factor one point . . . warp-two." He threw a hasty glance over his right shoulder. "Should I increase our own speed?"

"Steady as she goes, Mr. Sulu," responded Kirk calmly, his eyes never leaving the viewscreen.

A shorter pause, then, "Still gaining rapidly on us, sir."

How beautiful it was, Kirk had to admit to himself. Rippling, convulsing in smooth arcs of its body, the jawanda enlarged to fill the rear scanners, emitting energy in glowing discharges hundreds of kilometers long. What other inhabitant of the universe, however high, however low, sweated such magnificence?

"Captain," Sulu began worriedly.

"It's all right, Mr. Sulu. Attention to your station." He flicked a look sideways. "Mr. Spock?"

"Another minute yet, Captain."

Kirk considered. The jawanda was almost within contact distance of the ship's warp-drive units. If he accelerated, he chanced discouraging the creature. Or, worse, making it wary. Was it still angry or hungry enough to continue following them, even if he speeded up? Or would it—

"We are within the cage, Captain," Spock announced sharply. "Hivar has activated the mechanism." The first officer watched with interest through the images funneled to him from the Lactrans as Hivar the Toq drew strange sounds and lights from the free-form shape of the Boquian console with smooth movements of many-jointed crystalline limbs.

"Quarry is slowing, sir," reported Sulu. "Showing indications of uncertainty in its pursuit."

"It senses the collapsing gravity wells," Kirk murmured. Was the jawanda capable in its energy-engorged state of breaking clear of the cage?

"Slow to warp-one, Mr. Sulu."

"Reducing speed . . . It's beginning to change course, sir."

"Definitely suspicious now," muttered McCoy, staring raptly at the screen. They were about to play out the last act of the drama begun seemingly so long ago, back on the surface of Lactra.

"Full course change," Arex announced, "and it is accelerating."

"Bring us about on a pursuit course, Mr. Sulu . . . but slowly. Let's see if it can break free."

The *Enterprise* commenced another wide curve, which would bring it around behind the jawanda again—if Kirk chose

to give the order to increase ship velocity, for the energy-eater was now fleeing in the opposite direction.

Kirk knew that if it broke free of the Boquian mechanism they would never be able to approach within capture range again.

"It's slowing, sir," Sulu declared positively. "Slowing . . . It's stopped!"

On the heels of the helmsman's announcement, Spock informed them, "Hivar pronounces itself satisfied as to the mechanism's performance. All six moons have been properly aligned, and the jawanda is trapped by their gravity."

"For how long?" McCoy whispered, gesturing at the screen. "Look."

Twisting and writhing like confetti in a tornado, the jawanda was rushing in tight circles around the inside of its invisible cage. Incredible bursts of pure energy bristled on its surface as it hunted frenetically for a hole in the trap.

Accelerating breathtakingly to warp-three it probed violently at the weakest points of the cage, between the moons. But no matter which way it darted, it could not escape the attraction of at least four of the controlled satellites. The octahedral prison proved secure.

"That's a lot of energy it's throwing off," Kirk noted. "Mr. Sulu, activate our defensive screens." The helmsman touched several switches—not a minute too soon, it turned out, as something powerful shook the bridge. There was a pause and then a second enormous purple bolt of energy crossed the space between ship and jawanda.

"It may not be intelligent," Kirk observed, stilling the slight shaking in his hands, "but it's not blind and helpless, either." He knew the power of the *Enterprise*'s defensive screens, but it was one thing to consider them from the standpoint of abstract statistics and another to do so while looking down the throat of an energy charge as big around as one of the ship's warp-drive units.

As Kirk ordered the cruiser to back off as far as possible, the madly convulsing jawanda continued to throw harmless if awesome bolts at them.

Spock observed dispassionately, "We already know that the creature is able to transmute great quantities of energy, Captain. It is not surprising that so efficient a converter should be capable of utilizing its ability to discharge excess energy for defensive purposes."

They remained in position while the attacks from the jawanda decreased steadily in intensity.

"Damage report, Lieutenant Uhura?"

"All negative, Captain," she replied. "All decks and stations report no injuries and no damage, although Engineering reports that the first several charges put considerable stress on the defensive screens. Since then, however, they report all attacks shunted aside with ease."

Kirk's attention went once again to the screen. Save for throwing an isolated spark toward the *Enterprise*, the jawanda had apparently given up its assault. Its movements, also, were much subdued. There was no more violent spinning about and contorting. Now it drifted in one place, its black surface rippling slowly like the stomach of an exhausted, overweight man drawing in painful breaths after a long run.

Bright bursts of light continued to show within its great body, but they came in fitful spurts now instead of the regular patterning previously observed.

"We've tired it out, I think," Kirk commented. "Is the Boqus ready to move, Mr. Spock?"

The first officer nodded. "Hivar indicates that the ancient components are performing well. Given a modest amount of power to feed to the control console, it foresees no difficulty in sustaining the cage indefinitely. The Lactrans," he added unnecessarily, "are overjoyed at our success."

"We're not in orbit around Lactra yet," Kirk pointed out. "I'll accept congratulations later. What about the possibility of our prisoner absorbing fresh strength from the radiation we'll encounter once we reenter the denser region of our galaxy?"

"All the energy it could assimilate from passing stars cannot possibly match the quantity it has already sapped and discharged from the warp-drive engines, Captain," the first officer insisted, after performing several calculations on the

ship's computer. "We have already handled its best assault without damage."

"That's all I wanted to know. Mr. Arex?"

"Captain?"

"Plot a course to Lactra, presumably retracing our original tack via Boqu. Mr. Sulu, ahead warp-factor three."

Their acknowledgments sounded simultaneously, and soon the *Enterprise* was again Lactra-bound. Kirk's attention was still focused on their giant captive. He hoped Hivar the Toq was concentrating as intensely on his mechanism. They couldn't dare allow the jawanda even a small chance to escape.

But the octahedral cage formed by the six moons kept the energy-eater locked between them, dragging it smoothly along as they sped back toward the galaxy—although Kirk would have employed a term weaker than "sped," since at warp-three, they seemed to crawl along. But they were restricted to the maximum speed of which the old engines in the moons were capable.

During the following days Kirk had ample time to inspect that remarkable Boquian relic, its peculiar power leads, and the strange broadcast antennas temporarily installed on the epidermis of the *Enterprise*—antennas which somehow carried Hivar's instructions through the shapeless console to the six satellites caging the jawanda.

"Remarkable piece of instrumentation," Spock commented, bending to study the back of the console. It looked no different from the front.

"Prompted by a remarkable need," thought Hivar.

"How was it built?" inquired Kirk, wondering if it would last the duration of the journey back to Lactra.

"I do not know . . . I was able to learn only how to operate it." Hivar's concern mirrored Kirk's own. "The sooner we deposit the creature in orbit around your other guests' home world, the better I will feel, as it will signal the beginning of my return to Boqu."

The intercom buzzed for attention, and Kirk moved to acknowledge the call. "Bulk Transporter Room Three. This is the captain speaking."

"Lieutenant Uhura here, sir." There was an underlying hint of anxiety in that dulcet tone which made Kirk pay closer attention.

"Trouble, Lieutenant?"

"It's not certain, sir. According to Mr. Sulu, the creature is generating an unusual amount of energy. I've confirmed its output with my own instruments."

"You mean it's throwing energy bolts at us again?"

"No, sir." Kirk relaxed considerably, even though they'd already successfully fended off one such attack. "The discharge is in the form of radio waves."

"We already know that the jawanda is capable of producing those, Uhura," Kirk reminded her. "I presume you've detected something out of the ordinary about its present output or you wouldn't have called it to my attention."

"I think so, sir," she said slowly. "The emissions are in short, intense bursts of a type previously unrecorded. I have no idea what significance this holds, if any. But it's such an extreme departure from everything the creature has generated so far that I thought you'd wish to be notified."

"Rightly so, Lieutenant. I've no more idea than you what the meaning of this new activity is." He glanced back toward the attentive Spock.

"Nor have I, Captain," he admitted.

"Keep monitoring the output, Lieutenant," Kirk ordered her, "and begin taping." He flipped off the intercom and looked at the curious Boqus. "You'll have to continue the explanation of the mechanism's history later, Hivar. It's probably nothing, but . . ."

"But what, Captain Kirk?" came the thought, strong and heady.

"It's probably nothing." Kirk decided he was worrying unnecessarily over a harmless new phenomenon, when he had plenty of known dangers to plague himself with. A few moments of study should suffice; then he could dismiss the

development from his mind. But those few moments were not to be ignored. Their knowledge of jawandas still bordered on the nonexistent.

On returning to the bridge, Kirk's first instructions were for Uhura to play back some of the noise the jawanda had already produced. As it turned out, recordings weren't required.

"It hasn't let up, sir," the communications officer informed him. "It continues to repeat the same pattern, identically modulated as the initial outburst. Here, I'll put what it's currently broadcasting onto the speakers." Her hands adjusted controls.

An ear-splitting shriek drenched the bridge in bone-grating waves of sound. Kirk's hands went instinctively to his head. That soul-rending howl was piercing his skull over and over. The impression was worse than the actuality, since it was barely a couple of seconds before Uhura could reduce the volume to a bearable level.

"I'm sorry, sir," she apologized contritely. "I thought I'd reduced the level considerably." She eyed an isolated readout angrily. "Here's the trouble—the creature has intensified its output tremendously since I first contacted you." She shook her head in awed amazement. "The amount of energy it's putting out is just incredible, sir."

"I see. Mr. Spock, your opinion?"

Spock concluded his preliminary sensor study of the new emissions and looked up thoughtfully. "Perhaps it is merely another form of energy release, Captain, an instinctive reaction to the unusual situation in which it presently finds itself, akin in spirit if not function to the defensive charges it attacked us with before.

"At first I suspected that the noise might merely be the normal energy discharge of the creature, its intensity the result of all the radiation it had absorbed from the *Enterprise*. Now that I have heard it, I begin to doubt this explanation. My uncertainties are compounded by Lieutenant Uhura's insistence that these discharges are of a type previously not detected." She nodded ready confirmation. "Beyond the normal excretion of surplus energy, I cannot begin to imagine

what function these violent pulsations have—Wait . . . wait . . ."

A clumsy gray shape squeezed out of the turbolift onto the bridge. The young Lactran was already in close communication with Spock.

"The youth is relaying concern from Hivar the Toq," the first officer explained thickly. "The Boqus wishes to hear the sound for itself."

Kirk, picturing the eyeless, earless Boquian scientist, wondered if it "heard" in the same fashion as humans, or if the sound waves were absorbed uniformly across its sensitive crystalline surface. The latter was quite likely. The sound conductivity of crystals was known on Earth as far back as the Dark Ages.

"Pipe the broadcast through to the transporter chamber the Boqus is located in, Lieutenant," Kirk directed Uhura.

Her hands again adjusted controls. "Transporter Room locked into circuit, sir," she replied.

Something about the sound must have been familiar to the Boqus, because Spock's relayed response followed immediately on Uhura's announcement.

"Hivar recognizes the sound, Captain. There are recordings of identical vibrations on Boqu, and although they are extremely ancient Hivar insists the duplication here is unmistakable."

"Duplication of what?"

"A jawanda distress call."

That caused Kirk to pause, all right! There was only one possible corollary, but he asked the question anyway. "Distress call? To—others of its own kind?"

Spock turned to face him, though his gaze remained focused on a point halfway between the command chair and the science station. "Exactly, Captain."

Rapidly Kirk performed some crude calculations in his head, then relaxed slightly. Even if his estimations were a little off, there was still no reason to panic. "We could do without visits from our captive's cousins, Spock, but, judging from its initial attack, and taking into account that we'll be prepared this

time, our screens ought to be able to handle energy charges from a modest swarm of jawandas. Particularly from jawandas who haven't been sucking up energy from our engines. No, I don't see much reason for concern. We're already traveling at warp-three. Even if the calls are picked up, even if a few of the creatures have an intercept angle on us prior to our reentering the galactic field, they'll have only their natural store of energy to draw upon." He started to rise, intending to return to the transporter room to conclude the examination of the Boqus's console.

"Hivar the Toq begs to differ with you, Captain," countered Spock. "Hivar urges that in the event another of the creatures is contacted, we release our captive and accelerate away as rapidly as possible."

A thoroughly stunned Kirk settled slowly back into his chair. "But . . . why? For what reason? My evaluation—"

"The Lactrans are arguing strongly against such a possible course of action," the first officer continued. "Hivar sidesteps. It insists that such an eventuality is unlikely, but that it must be considered."

"I still don't see why." Kirk frowned.

"The Boqus is embarrassed, Captain. It has withheld information, in the manner of the Lactrans, but claims that in this case it was only to"—the first officer strained, trying to translate alien concepts—"spare us needless worry. Hivar now feels that the worry is needful. The Lactrans could not know, but Hivar explains that if the old records are correct, we have captured an immature jawanda."

McCoy spoke for the first time since Kirk and Spock had returned to the bridge. He had remained unusually silent, standing by the engineering station and listening to the strange moans of their captive. But this latest information moved him to comment.

"You mean that monster is a baby?"

"Equivalent terminology has not existed in reference to jawandas, Doctor, but in the present situation Hivar feels it is appropriate."

"Then how big," McCoy wanted to know—or did he, he wondered—"does an *adult* jawanda grow?"

"No one knows," Spock murmured. There was silence on the bridge.

XI

"Hivar is struggling to recall long-dormant, little-used knowledge, Captain," Spock finally said into the lingering silence. "The estimate of our captive's immaturity is based on such information. The largest jawanda the Boqus were ever forced to drive away was . . . a moment . . ."

The pause was too much for an impatient McCoy, who soon pressed, "Was what, Spock?"

"Please, Doctor," the first officer cautioned calmly. "I am attempting with Hivar's aid to convert ancient Boquian measurements to Federation equivalents." A longer pause; then he announced firmly, "The largest specimen recorded by the ancients was approximately two hundred ten thousand by fifty-two thousand kilometers. That is only an approximation, remember."

Kirk tried to envision a living creature with a surface area five times that of the Earth and gave up. "That's only the largest the Boqus *know* of. I suppose . . ." He hesitated, and the question came out in a whisper. "The possibility exists that there could be larger ones?"

"As a matter of fact," Spock agreed, readily confirming Kirk's worst imaginings, "the planet-bound Boqus theorized from specimens they observed and far-distant radiation they recorded that exceptionally mature jawandas could grow considerably larger."

"How big," the captain queried masochistically, "is 'considerably'?" He was still trying to adjust to the information that the continent-sized energy-eater trailing them was but a midget of its kind.

"Hivar suggests without humor that you use your imagination, Captain. Theoretically, there *is* no upper limit. There are no physiological restraints on a jawanda's growth, and nothing is known of their age. Hivar goes on to say that there is no reason to suppose that, barring a collision with a

star, a jawanda could not grow to the size of a sun. Though he reminds us that this is only theory."

"How encouraging," muttered a dazed McCoy.

"Never mind, Spock," declared Kirk suddenly. "I have no desire to tangle with anything even half the size of that old recorded supergiant, whether the Boquian mechanism can shove it around or not. But it will take something that size, which can demonstrate its power, to make us abandon this catch. Because I'm not sure which would be worse—fighting off such an antagonist or starting this hunt all over again, from the beginning." He looked forward.

"Mr. Arex, maintain maximum resolution on all long-range scanners."

"Yes, sir," the navigator replied tersely. "Lieutenant Uhura, I want you to engage your own long-range detectors and initiate a full-spectrum sweep in the region immediately astern, with regular adjustments to scan every second of sky."

"Monitoring wave sweep, sir," she declared several minutes later.

Kirk's thoughts then turned inward, brooding on ominous possibilities as he studied the viewscreen. Five thousand kilometers of thin organism rippled slowly aft. Listening to the steady, powerful bursts of energy which still sounded over the muted speakers, he considered the history of man's efforts to turn amplified ears to the stars. Little had any of those ancient scientists realized, when they'd fought to make sense of the strange pops and crackles and hums, that among that stellar babble might be the cry of a troubled child.

"It will not be long at our present speed, Captain," announced Spock encouragingly, "before we enter the first fringe star-clusters along our return path into the Milky Way. According to the information imparted by the Boqus, this should be enough to discourage any pursuit."

"How can it be so sure?" wondered McCoy. "The risk of permanent imprisonment, or even death, wouldn't be enough to dissuade a lot of human parents from trying to rescue their offspring."

Spock eyed him reprovingly. "You are anthropomorphizing, Doctor. We cannot ascribe even faintly human or Vulcan

motivations to these creatures. They lie outside the boundaries of familiar xenobiology. Besides, it is likely that they reproduce asexually, which renders the parent-child relationship absurd."

McCoy stared at the viewscreen. "I only hope you're right, Spock."

Days passed during which the captured jawanda continued to emit regular cries. It showed no sign of weakening. On the contrary, as they drew near the outer fringe of the galaxy, the outbursts intensified slightly.

Listening closely, Kirk sought to identify something recognizable as a cry for help in those dips and squeaks of electromagnetic radiation. He failed, with a consistency that pleased him. The purely electronic wail enabled him to regard the thing behind the ship as an elemental force of nature instead of a living creature which might possibly possess a glimmer of the thoughts and emotions Spock insisted it did not.

"Captain," Uhura announced slowly, "I think I've got something." Amazing, Kirk mused, how much was contained in that single word, "something."

"It's at the extreme end of my scanners," she went on. "It may be nothing at all, but we're still in intergalactic space, and I thought that—"

"Of course," Kirk cut her off impatiently. "You've isolated it?"

"Yes. It's definitely not a stable intergalactic phenomenon. At first I thought it might be a very small radio nebula—it's definitely generating strong radio pulses. But it wanders about too much. I can't tell yet whether it's moving toward us or not, but . . ." She gazed significantly at Kirk.

"Keep monitoring it, Lieutenant," Kirk instructed her. "Mr. Spock, initiate intensive sensor scan along the coordinates being studied by Lieutenant Uhura. Let me know what you turn up."

"Very good, Captain."

"How much longer before we reach a star with sufficient gravity to hold a jawanda?"

Spock checked library information. "At least another three days at our present speed, Captain, possibly four. Naturally, that time would shrink rapidly at warp-four or warp-five."

Kirk spent a few moments ruminating on their options. "Contact the Boqus, Mr. Spock. Inquire if there's *any* chance, however slight, that the six moons could attain a faster speed."

A short wait, and Spock replied, "Hivar says no, Captain. We might as well abandon the creature now to retain control of the mechanism. The Lactrans are again arguing strenuously. They are willing to jeopardize their lives in order to return the jawanda to Lactra."

"That's noble of them," snorted McCoy, "but what about the rest of us who don't care to stick our necks out so they can add that"—and he gestured toward the screen—"electrified tinfoil to their zoo?"

"Easy, Bones," Kirk advised him, "we're not at that point yet. It may turn out to be just a false alarm."

The alarm was ringing louder the following day. Whatever was generating those powerful pulsations was doing so at a steadily rising rate.

"Estimated distance to the object, Lieutenant Uhura?"

She checked her readouts. "It's still hard to say, sir. The strength of the emissions, and by inference the distance separating us, could vary greatly depending on the size of the creature."

A sinking feeling ran through him. "You're convinced the signals are emanating from another jawanda, then?"

She hesitated. "The differences in the type of pulsations are significant, sir, but the frequencies are identical. Say better than fifty-fifty that it's another."

"An inaccurate observation, Lieutenant," Spock commented mildly. He would never cease to be fascinated by the human tendency to offer approximations in place of absolute figures in matters scientific.

"Let it go now, Jim," urged McCoy. "We'll circle far around and find another specimen for the Lactrans."

"Not yet, Bones. This new arrival—if that's what it turns out to be—may only be curious. Maybe it's not coming in response to the other's cries. We've come too far and worked too hard to give up easily. Remember our obligation to the Lactrans."

"Remember our obligation to the ship."

Kirk threw him a sharp look. "I'm fully aware of that, Bones."

McCoy turned away. "Sorry, Jim . . . Forgot myself for a moment."

"Forget it. We're all operating under stress. The possibility of fighting something that could envelop a few Earths is enough to rattle anyone's thoughts."

What was troubling Kirk was not the chance that another jawanda was the source of the new emissions—that already seemed fairly certain. It was the fact that the mysterious generator was continuing to gain on them—without an intercept angle. It was approaching rapidly from almost dead astern.

That meant that at least some jawandas were capable of moving at speeds above warp-three. Given that, there was no reason to suppose that one of the creatures might not be able to exceed warp-eight—the maximum emergency velocity of the *Enterprise*.

If Spock was right and the jawanda was purely a superefficient energy-converting organism, then it should be as incapable of experiencing the desire for vengeance as it was of feeling parental concern. In that case, it didn't really matter how fast certain jawandas could travel.

On the other hand, if Spock was wrong and the creatures were able to feel higher emotions . . . Kirk refused to consider the possibilities. Long before that he would have to make other decisions.

"It is obvious that we have two choices." Spock pontificated from the science station. "We can retreat at top speed toward the safety of stellar gravity, abandoning our capture in the process, and hope this will be sufficient to discourage any pursuit. Or we can continue as we are and hope that the

creature closing on us will become disinterested, give up, or prove unable to hamper our movements."

"Neither of which is an especially appealing alternative," Kirk commented distastefully.

"I concur, Captain. With your permission, therefore, I should like to initiate what is known in human vernacular as a decoy action."

"Decoy?" McCoy echoed. "What are we going to do—have the ship's nonmetallic fabricators make up an artificial jawanda?"

"No, Doctor. I doubt that a visual simulacrum would have any effect. These creatures obviously detect one another by means of their emissions. Sight would be a superfluous sense in the void."

"Go ahead, Mr. Spock," Kirk urged. "Whatever you have in mind can't worsen our situation."

"I hope it can better it, Captain." He faced Communications. "Lieutenant Uhura, have you a precise record of the pattern of the captured jawanda's output?"

"Many, Mr. Spock. Its broadcast has remained consistent, and I've had more than enough time to examine its wave generation in depth."

"How complex is the pattern?" Kirk began to have an inkling of his first officer's plan.

"Not very . . . Oh, I understand. I don't see why our equipment couldn't generate a similar signal, Mr. Spock."

It didn't take long for an emergency engineering and tech crew to ready one of the cruiser's shuttlecraft for a highspeed deep-space run. Lieutenant M'ress supervised the modification of the shuttle's communications equipment, which involved installation of components which would permit the tiny craft to channel far more power than normal into its communications instrumentation.

The hasty alterations completed, the shuttlecraft hangar was cleared and the remotely guided craft launched away at its maximum acceleration. There followed a period of anxious waiting for the shuttle to reach a decent distance from the *Enterprise*. All the while, the source of new radiation drew nearer and nearer.

"Time enough," Spock announced, looking up from his readouts. "Begin broadcasting immediately, Lieutenant Uhura." As she acknowledged, Spock faced the command chair.

"Utilizing the full broadcast power of the *Enterprise*'s communications equipment, Captain, as rebroadcast out into space through the shuttlecraft's modified instruments, we should be able to produce considerably more noise than our captive does. Hopefully, the pursuing jawanda will consider the shuttlecraft's broadcast as the distress call of a second one of its kind. We are hoping that it will opt to aid the louder of the two calls."

Spock's logic, as always, seemed sound. Uhura adjusted her controls, and soon a second jawanda cry for help was filling space, one twice as powerful as the first.

"Captain?"

Kirk looked toward the navigator. "What is it, Mr. Arex?"

"I believe the second creature is changing its course. Indications point to—"

A rhythmic screech drowned him out. Hastily Uhura adjusted her instrumentation once again, and the volume dropped.

"What happened, Lieutenant?"

Uhura studied her gauges and sensor feedbacks. "Apparently our captive has increased the strength of its own radiations, sir. The level is considerably above what we are rebroadcasting through the shuttlecraft."

"Second object shifting direction again, Captain," the soft-spoken Edoan announced. "It is once again following—and it appears to have increased its speed."

Kirk wondered if they could fool their still unknowable pursuer another time, wondered if it felt anger at deception or was simply continuing to follow the strongest signal.

"Increase broadcast power, Lieutenant," Spock directed her.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Spock." Uhura threw him a look of helplessness. "We're broadcasting at maximum strength now. In fact, we can hold this level only another twenty minutes before components begin to melt."

"That won't be necessary, Uhura," Kirk told her. "Maintain power, though. Mr. Sulu, vary the course of the shuttlecraft—random pattern, simulate erratic behavior. Let's see if the second jawanda reacts to that."

"Course still unchanged, sir," Arex reported five minutes later. "Still in pursuit."

Kirk sighed and faced the science station. "It was a good idea, Spock—only it didn't quite work. If we could put more power into our decoy broadcast . . ." He shook his head slowly.

Spock's head tilted at the odd angle Kirk had come to recognize often these past weeks. "Before abandoning the idea, the Lactrans wish to make an attempt of their own." He looked around. "And they want your approval before they do so . . . Doctor."

"Me?" McCoy was taken aback. "Why mine?"

"Because what they wish to try involves a certain amount of discomfort for every member of the crew."

McCoy turned pensive and finally said, " 'Discomfort' is a mild word. Do they think whatever they have in mind could be dangerous?"

A pause while Spock relayed: "They do not think so, Doctor, but admit that they cannot be sure. It is a new thought of theirs, something never before tried, because the opportunity to do so with minds like ours has not previously existed."

Kirk wasn't sure he liked the sound of that. Still, he had to consider the enigmatic threat closing on them every second.

"Bones?"

McCoy looked askance at Kirk. "This is crazy, Jim. How can I estimate the danger when I have no idea what they're going to try?" He turned to Spock again. "You're sure you've got your 'conceptualizations' straight, Spock? They did say 'discomfort' and not 'disablement'?"

"Quite sure, Doctor."

McCoy shrugged. "Then I suppose I can't object."

"All right, Spock," Kirk said warily, "tell them go ahead." He activated the general intercom and explained to the crew as well as he was able what was about to happen. He clicked off

finally. "Tell them also that the second we receive any indication that anyone is being seriously affected, they'll have to stop whatever they're doing."

"They understand and agree, Captain," the first officer informed him instantly.

Silence followed. Kirk sat tensely in his chair, waiting for something to happen. When minutes passed and nothing did, an impatient, nervous McCoy asked, "When are they going to begin, Spock? If they don't hurry up . . ."

"They already have, Doctor. They are proceeding slowly, so as to be certain they do not hurt anyone—including themselves. Don't you feel it?"

"Feel what, Spock? I don't . . ." Something was whispering inside his head. Irritated, he tried to shake it off, but, like a persistent mosquito, it refused to go away. Instead, it intensified slightly, still irritating but not quite painful. The internal humming became a headache, then a throbbing behind his eyes, relentless and unresolved. He started to speak to Spock, but decided not to when he saw that the first officer was sitting rigidly at attention. The more intensively McCoy tried to analyze the sensation, the more the ache increased.

"Captain," Uhura groaned, holding both hands to her temples, "how much longer does this go on? I can't stand it and monitor the sensors as well."

" 'Discomfort' was the right term, Spock," the captain admitted, wincing. "It's not quite as bad as a migraine—but I hope we're not supposed to endure it too much longer. What are they doing?"

Spock's reply came slowly, since he was speaking under the dual stress of translating and this new mental strain. "They say it will grow no worse. As to the activity itself, the proposal occurred to them when it became clear how limited was the broadcast capability of the *Enterprise*. They are surprised that we did not recognize the presence on board of several hundred additional generators of modulated electrical impulses. The mind of every crew member is such a transmitter.

"It is an ability of all Lactrans to serve as a focusing point for such energies, much as a magnifying lens concentrates sunlight. They are presently utilizing the generative capacity of every mind on board to beam a simulacrum of the jawanda's distress call to the same point in space as the shuttlecraft. The combination of the shuttle's own broadcast and this mental projection may be strong enough to—"

Arex, who alone of the bridge complement seemed relatively unaffected by the Lactrans' activities, made both aliens and science officer into seers: "Captain—our pursuers are changing course once again. They are definitely inclining toward the retreating shuttlecraft, by a significant number of degrees."

Kirk's response struggled through the pounding in his brain. "Lieutenant Uhura, what reaction from our captive?"

"No . . . change, sir," she replied, her expression contorted from the effort of interpreting her readouts. "It's maintaining the same level of broadcast intensity. Maybe it's reached its limits."

"Still continuing on a divergent course, sir," Arex reported. "They are definitely headed away from us now and are beginning to fall behind."

"Thank you, Mr. Arex. Continue close sensor scan on—" He broke off, rehearing the navigator's recent words. "A moment ago you said 'pursuers,' Lieutenant. There are more than one?"

"It appears likely, Captain. I am tracking three to four sources sufficiently far apart to preclude any other explanation. I thought at first that the one very large creature might be generating signals from various regions of its body, but it seems now that the distance between sources is too great. All, however, are angling toward the shuttlecraft."

Kirk wondered if the relief was visible in his expression. To have one of the monsters closing on them was frightening enough. Three or four . . . "Mr. Sulu, how long before we reach the gravity well of a strong sun?"

There was no formal "border" to the home galaxy, of course. Distances between suns were so unimaginably vast that the term was more suggestive than descriptive. But,

compared to the reach of intergalactic space, the gravityless habitat of the jawanda, the region they were about to enter was rich in stars and jawanda-pinioning gravity.

"Twenty-two minutes ship time, Captain," the helmsman finally responded. Kirk's anxiety lightened a little at that encouraging report.

"Keep a close scan on our decoyed pursuit, Mr. Arex. Let me know the instant they show any sign of changing course again. Mr. Spock, can the Lactrans sustain their broadcast for the requisite time remaining?"

"They reply that they will have to, Captain."

Kirk nodded understandingly, his gaze shifting back to the long-range scanner view now on the main screen. It showed only dark, empty space aft of the imprisoned jawanda. For another twenty minutes it had to stay that way.

They crept along at warp-three, Kirk chafing at the restrictions of the Boquian mechanism which forced them to travel at far below normal cruising speed. As the Lactrans had promised, the throbbing grew no worse, but neither did it decrease.

Glancing around the bridge, he saw that Uhura, Sulu, Arex, and even Spock were beginning to show signs of real strain. He heard his own discomfort reflected in the concern in McCoy's voice. The doctor walked over, massaging his temples with slow circular hand motions.

"Jim, even a headache can produce damage if it's allowed to continue untreated. I can't prescribe treatment for something like this."

Kirk checked the official chronometer set in one arm of his chair. "A few minutes more, Bones. We can survive a few minutes more."

Then they would enter the vicinity of NGC 7332. An unremarkable M3 star, hitherto unvisited by anything more complex than a Federation long-range mapping drone. But the cold orange-red giant was a nearing haven for the *Enterprise*, a ten-million-kilometer-wide beacon whose gravity was now akin to the fire with which primitive man had frightened off pursuit by hulking furry carnivore.

He berated himself for falling into the trap McCoy so often entangled himself in, ascribing familiar characteristics to the unfamiliar—in this case the jawanda. That inexplicably efficient inhabitant of deep space was neither furry nor carnivorous.

A shout came from the normally placid navigator's station.

"What is it, Mr. Arex?" he asked quickly. "Have the signal sources changed course again?"

"No, sir." Something in the Edoan's voice sent a tremor along Kirk's nerves. "I have detected a new source of radio emissions. It is larger . . . than all the others combined."

"Bearing?"

"Directly for us, sir . . . warp . . . warp-*seven!*"

"Time to gravitational tangency, Mr. Sulu?"

"Three minutes twenty seconds remaining, Captain," the helmsman shot back.

"The new source is far off, Captain. We should just slip into the safe zone before it reaches us."

"Recalculate for precision," Kirk ordered, thinking in astonishment that that was one phrase he never had expected to direct to his first officer.

"Inconclusive, Captain," Spock replied immediately. "Distance undeterminable at this time."

"Source accelerating!" Arex gasped in disbelief. "Nearing warp-eight!"

"Less than two minutes to go!" shouted Sulu. "Plotting minimum possible orbital radii to maximize gravity effect."

Still nothing on the rear scanners. Where was the apparition? "Emergency magnification on long-range sensors, Mr. Sulu," he directed the helmsman.

Sulu acknowledged, and once more the retreating emptiness jumped perceptibly—to show only a narrower view of nothingness.

"Sixty seconds, Captain."

"Warp-nine, sir," the Edoan said dazedly. "Moving up to warp-ten."

Whatever was after them was now traveling faster than any Federation vessel in existence. It must be converting energy at an incredible rate.

Equally unbelievably, Kirk suddenly felt better than he had in some time. Then he realized that the throbbing in his skull had vanished.

"The Lactrans are aware that their ruse is not discouraging this new, nearer threat, Captain. They see no reason for continuing their broadcast, especially since one of them is verging on unconsciousness and they feel we may soon require our full abilities."

Kirk had time to feel ashamed. While he'd been suffering along with everyone else during the amplified mental broadcast, he'd neglected to consider what toll it might be taking on the amplifiers—the Lactrans themselves.

"Fifteen seconds, sir." Sulu was counting down. "Eleven, ten, nine . . ."

"NGC 7332 in sight on forward scanners, Captain," announced Spock reassuringly. Sulu continued to count off eternities.

"Four, three, two—"

An explosive shriek of outrage and disappointment erupted from every bridge speaker despite Uhura's desperate attempt to reduce it to bearable intensity. Sparks flared from various seals and seams in the communications console, and a small explosion blew out several gauges, the concussion throwing her from her seat. McCoy was at her side in an instant.

"Entering the strong gravitational pull of NGC 7332, Captain," Spock informed him solemnly.

Kirk didn't hear him. He was still seeing something which had appeared for a brief second on the viewscreen, details of its appearance uncertain because the overloaded scanners had automatically blanked themselves out immediately after contacting it.

For an instant something gargantuan had drifted there, filling the screen with discharges of purple and crimson energy whose diameter exceeded that of half a hundred Earths.

Then the scanners came on again and the sun-shape was gone, frustrated, soaring in angry desperation back to the gravitational void of the abyss . . .

"Status, Mr. Spock?" Kirk asked slowly.

"We still retain control of our captive," the science officer assured him. "It seems to have ceased all broadcasting. Undoubtedly it realizes that it has passed the gravitational point of no return."

Kirk swiveled his chair. "Lieutenant?"

Uhura was back on her feet and studying her damaged station with professional concern. "I'm all right, sir. That last outburst—overwhelming." She smiled at McCoy. "Thanks, Doctor." McCoy nodded and moved away, still keeping an inconspicuous eye on her to make sure she was as stable as she claimed to be.

"Hivar the Toq," Spock continued, "states that the mechanism is undamaged and still operating well. We should have no difficulty in retaining control of the captive all the way back to Lactra. The Lactrans are tending to themselves. They are extremely wearied, and the youngster expresses some concern. Both adults are extremely pleased with us. We did not panic, as lower animals would have, and permit the jawanda to escape."

"I'm glad we came up to their expectations," replied Kirk drily. "Continue on course to Lactra at our present speed, Mr. Sulu."

"Aye, sir . . . with pleasure."

"How's your headache, Bones?"

"Completely gone, Jim. No aftereffects, either." McCoy looked thoughtful. "It occurs to me that the Lactrans' ability to focus the mental output of many minds into various wavelengths could be a powerful weapon."

Kirk agreed. "True, Bones, but I don't think we have to worry about that. Not only aren't the Lactrans a belligerent race, but they'd hardly bother to involve themselves in the petty private squabbles of such primitive creatures as ourselves." He grinned and looked toward the navigator's station.

"Mr. Arex."

"Yes, Captain?"

"Before we entered the gravity well of NGC 7332, I thought we had a momentary view of our pursuer—certainly not extensive enough a glimpse to tell anything. You were monitoring the long-range sensors aft at the time. Did they succeed in recording sufficient information to give us an idea of its size?"

"They did, sir," the Edoan announced slowly. "Quite incredible. It appears that even the Boqus' estimations of the jawanda's upper growth limits were on the conservative side. Were our last pursuer so inclined, and able to withstand the radiation, it could have enveloped Sol."

"No wonder they exist only in intergalactic space," Kirk whispered after a moment's reflection. "They need the room."

McCoy was trying to adjust to the existence of a living organism that size. He could not, naturally. It was beyond the visualizing ability of the human mind. One could write a one and follow it with nine zeros and call it a billion, but the sum could not really be comprehended.

So it was with their final nemesis, an unimaginable colossus turned at the last possible instant by a star trillions of times greater in mass than itself.

From NGC 7332 the journey back to Lactra was mercifully uneventful. Their captive jawanda, now revealed as a true midget of its kind, occasionally testified to its continued health by emitting outbursts of subdued electronic noise.

But it somehow comprehended its position. It made no fresh assaults on the *Enterprise* and did not attempt to flee the gravitational bond of the octahedral cage.

At warp-three the trip back to Lactra took much longer than the journey out, and Kirk and the rest of the crew luxuriated in every minute of it. Eventually, though, the jawanda was installed in polar orbit around that strange world, to circle it forever like some huge foil-shaped moon.

Now fully recovered, the two adult Lactrans and their boisterous offspring were transported back to the surface, though not before confessing that the expedition had enriched their knowledge as well as their zoo.

Thus, free of further obligation to the elephantine super-minds, Kirk was able with inexpressible relief to give the order to return at warp-six to Boqu.

Everyone experienced a few moments of apprehension as the *Enterprise* once again left the safety of the galactic arm, apprehension engendered by the fear that a vengeful cluster of mature jawandas might be lingering to ambush them.

But, for all their great size and efficiency at converting energy, the jawandas were the most elemental of organisms, from a mental standpoint. If they possessed minds, these seemed not extensive enough to include memories. The return to Boqu was as peaceful as the race to NGC 7332 had been panicky.

Hivar the Toq and the marvelous Boquian mechanism were returned to the planet's surface, which was still undergoing a burst of activity, thanks to the solution to the pandemic discovered by Dr. McCoy's team.

There was even a remote chance, Hivar assured Kirk, that Boqu might one day apply for admission as the Federation's farthest-flung member—an eventuality which could be extremely discomforting to such as the Klingons and Romulans.

There was much more to be learned from the sociable Boqus than from the aloof inhabitants of Lactra. In fact, the entire geology section volunteered en masse to remain on Boqu to study the incredible silicon-based ecology. A reluctant Kirk had to deny their applications, for there was no telling when another Federation ship might reach the distant, isolated world.

Leaving the orange-and-mauve storm clouds of Boqu, they returned again to the comforting light of the home galaxy. It was as they were traversing the final stretches of intergalactic void that Spock looked up from his station, wondering aloud.

"One thing continues to prey on my mind, Captain."

"Not fatally, I hope," McCoy quipped.

Spock continued, ignoring the doctor. "We were astonished at the size of the jawanda we captured, only to subsequently discover that it was but an immature specimen of its kind. This was emphasized by the apparent size of its unsuccessful

rescuers, who themselves shrank into smallness by comparison with that somewhat larger—"

" 'Somewhat larger,' " McCoy murmured derisively.

"—last pursuer," the first officer concluded, with an admonishing stare at the *Enterprise*'s chief physician. "It continues to occur to me that that final colossus might have its own masters out in the depths of the abyss."

That conception was sufficiently stupefying to silence even McCoy. Together with Kirk, he stared at the view brought close by the ship's after scanners. It was hundreds of thousands of light-years to the nearest pinpoint of light—the outlying stars of Nubecula Major. True, the size of their last pursuer had been unimaginable . . . but what was more unimaginable than the vastness of the intergalactic gulf?

"I don't know, Mr. Spock," Kirk mused softly. "Until we encountered the jawandas I'd always been accustomed to thinking of living beings in terms of meters, or, rarely, in thousands of meters. The jawandas have changed that to thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions of kilometers." He gestured toward the viewscreen. "Perhaps someday we'll encounter creatures out there who'll dwarf the greatest jawanda, and then we'll have to grow used to measuring organisms with light-years instead of metrics."

That was a bit extreme for McCoy. "Now think a minute, Jim, about the impossibility of a living being a light-year in length. Just consider . . . consider . . ." His voice trailed off. "On second thought, I'm not going to consider it right now. One lingering headache in the past couple of months is plenty. I think it's time to consider an extended session in the Rec Room." He left the bridge, the doors of the turbolift closing behind him.

But not before Kirk saw that the doctor's final speculative gaze was focused on the screen and the darkly ominous yet beckoning reaches of the fading intergalactic gulf.

JIHAD

(Adapted from a script by Stephen Kandel)

I

As things turned out, it was fortunate Spock's recovery was rapid. "Things" came in the form of a Class-A Security Prime Order - a classification so strict that Kirk was required to unscramble it himself, using a locked computer annex, in the sanctuary of his own cabin.

The instructions revealed by decoding were brief, even curt. They generated feelings of both puzzlement and anticipation in Kirk.

Something of both must have shown in his face as he handed Lieutenant Arex the slip of paper.

"Set course for arrival at these coordinates, Lieutenant."

"Very good, sir." The Edoan navigator took the slip, examined the figures inscribed thereon and commenced transferring them into the navigational computer. Only after he had completed the assigned task did he allow himself a moment of personal reflection.

When he eventually spoke, his statement was both fact and query.

"Captain, the indicated coordinates have been programed. We are proceeding toward them at standard cruising speed."

"Thank you, Mr. Arex." The navigator continued to eye him. "Was there something else?"

"Captain, I do not possess a perfect memory. However, there was something about our intended destination which prodded

at me. Upon concluding programing, I checked out my supposition and found it confirmed.

"There is nothing of planetary size in the region we are headed for - much less at the specified coordinates."

If he expected Kirk to make a counterclaim or supply some new information, he was disappointed "You're quite right, Mr. Arex. That quadrant's as empty as a spatial equator."

"A rendezvous, then, with another ship?" the navigator asked hopefully.

"At this point I'm not permitted to say, Lieutenant. Although," and his voice dropped to a faint whisper which Arex could barely pick up, "you might say something like that."

Arex turned back to his console, more confused than before. It might have consoled him to know that Kirk was equally puzzled. Fearful of having made a mistake in unscrambling, he'd gone through the decoding process three times. Three times he received the same reply from the bowels of the computer.

And each time the answer was just as enigmatic as before.

Ordinarily he would have requested clarification of orders so extreme from Starfleet. But Class-A Prime - these orders were not to be questioned only obeyed. Such orders emanated only from the highest echelons of Starfleet HQ. Something critical was up.

And yet, if it was so vital, why did the orders specify they proceed at normal cruising speed? And what were they expected to rendezvous with? Clearly, secrecy took precedent over execution in this.

There was nothing cryptic about the instructions themselves - only the rationale behind them. They stated simply that the *Enterprise* was to proceed to such and such coordinates, whereupon they would meet something/someone at whose disposal they were to place themselves.

That was all. No additional details or instructions.

It wasn't like Starfleet to supply such sketchy information to back an important order. So much hush-hush suggested something else.

"Someone is badly frightened," Spock agreed. McCoy had finally released him from Sick Bay, to the great relief of both. But he could shed no further light on the orders.

"There are no facts on which to speculate, Captain."

"Well then, Spock, we'll just have to wait until someone supplies us with some."

There were surprises from the moment they neared the rendezvous coordinates, days later. An awful lot of people seemed to know about what purported to be an ultra-secret enterprise.

"I have *multiple* contact, sir," Sulu had reported, "at the coordinates - with something big at the center."

Hours passed. "Put what you can on the screen, Mr. Sulu."

The visual which resulted was revealing indeed. Numerous spacecraft were grouped loosely around the rendezvous point. They were as curious a collection of interstellar travelers as Kirk had seen in a long time.

At least half a dozen civilizations were represented here, possibly more. All were arranged - one couldn't quite say orbiting - around a huge green-and-silver ball. It radiated with the brightness of artificial atmospheric lighting. Against the total blackness of deep space and in the absence of a sun, it seemed to pulse gently.

Too small to be a planet, too small to be even a rogue moon. Too big to be a spacecraft.

In point of fact, it was all three.

Spock's gaze was riveted to the main viewscreen with an intensity rarely seen. "A Vedalan asteroid," he murmured. "I have never seen one before outside of bad pictures and worse sketches."

"Nor have I, Spock," admitted Kirk, likewise awed.

"Well I've never even heard of them, or it, or whatever you're talking about," Uhura broke in. "Somebody elucidate."

"The Vedala," Spock explained smoothly, "are the oldest space-traversing race known. They are so old that they long ago abandoned their worn-out home worlds to begin a nomadic life wandering among the stars.

"They travel at great speeds on large asteroids or small planetoids which have been remade to suit their environmental requirements. In addition to tremendous mobility, these tiny artificial worlds provide them with both personal and racial privacy - a quality they are known to value above all else.

"Yet for some reason, they now apparently require the presence of outsiders."

"And we're to place ourselves at their disposal," Kirk murmured, studying miniature mountain ranges, admiring the pocket oceans and manicured plains which studded the silver globe.

"Captain," reported Uhura, all business once more, "we're being scanned."

Kirk was reminded that the Vedala affected a pastoral veneer and took pains to avoid flaunting their technological knowhow.

What could they need the *Enterprise* for, then? Or these other ships, for that matter?

"Everybody sit tight," he ordered. Time passed as they drew nearer, then Uhura announced the replacement of the scanning signal with another.

"We're being hailed, Captain. No visual."

"Let's hear what we came to hear, Lieutenant." Uhura adjusted controls and an eerie, piping voice filled the bridge.

"Welcome, *Enterprise*. Welcome, Captain Kirk and First Officer Spock. We will expect you as soon as possible. Your coordinates for transporting down are..." and the voice ran off a series of figures which Uhura recorded, played through to the main transporter room.

"Please be kind enough to pardon the lack of visual welcome," the voice concluded, "but as you may know, we are extremely protective of our privacy. We regret any offense this may cause ... but it is required."

"No offense taken," Kirk replied. "Coordinates received."

"Polite enigmas, aren't they?" Sulu commented.

Kirk was about to press further when an unobtrusive palm covered the armchair pickup.

"I think we had best meet politeness with politeness, Captain. Even asking the name of our greeter might be construed by the Vedala as an intrusion - even an offensive gesture."

"I think you're over-reacting, Spock, but ... all right." Deductions would wait until they finally met their hosts. He rose from the chair.

"Mr. Scott, you're in charge until Mr. Spock and I return."

"Very well, sir. Uh, might I ask, when might that be?"

"No idea, Scotty," he said, moving toward the door. He looked back at a sudden thought. "Why, Scotty, the Vedala have a reputation for paranoid secretiveness, sure. But they're not belligerent. Surely you're not worried about *them* doing us harm?"

"Not the Vedala, Captain, no - though I kinna trust 'em as completely as you seem to." He indicated the assembled

starships circling the Vedala homeship. "But there're some ships out there that belong to folk who've been known to get nasty now and again. They could have representatives down there, too."

"I don't think the Vedala would let anyone run amuck on their homeship, Scotty, but don't worry. Mr. Spock and I will keep our communicators close at hand."

"Dinna worry - that's one order I never can seem to obey, Captain," Scott murmured - but Kirk and Spock were already in the elevator.

"Any idea what the specified coordinates will put us down on, Mr. Kyle?" Kirk asked the transporter chief.

"Something in the atmosphere seems to produce the daylight they receive on the surface, Captain," Kyle replied. "It makes direct visual observation very difficult."

"Consistent with what we know," Spock observed.

"*However*, the people down in cartography are fairly certain you'll be setting down on dry land, in a relatively level region."

Kirk and Spock assumed positions in the alcove.

"If you'll just take a half-step to the left, sir," Kyle requested. Kirk did so. Kyle manipulated several instruments at once, put his hand on the main switch. "Energizing, sir."

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They stood in a grassy glade encircled by tall, lushly leaved trees. A small stream wound merrily down the low slope just before them.

But the sky overhead was strange. Kirk thought he detected a reflection from something solid. They stood under a transparent dome that sealed them off from the rest of the homeship. He could see where it curved down in the distance to meet the surface - undoubtedly to seal them in and avoid

contaminating any more of the home than was required by common courtesy.

Yet, they had transported straight through it. Kirk didn't feel too confident about the accomplishment. Little enough existed in the way of Vedalan artifacts, but it was known that they were oustanding chemists.

Something that resembled an explosive was just as likely to be a composite made from vegetable shortenings, while a soap bubble might prove impervious to the strongest phaser. Yet any deceptiveness on the part of the Vedala was unintentional - or had been till now. It remained to be discovered whether that record would remain unblemished.

They could have made a great contribution to Federation civilization - or any Galactic civilization, for that matter. All entreaties to join or participate, however, were met with the excuse of painful shyness by rarely contacted representatives of the race.

It was the Vedalan way of refusing without insulting.

Besides, what could anyone offer them they did not already have or could not obtain on their own terms? For example, the presence of the *Enterprise* and various other vessels to carry out some as yet unknown task? But that was only common sense.

When the Vedala found it needful to call for help, it was in the best interest of all to respond.

Kirk couldn't tell whether the being standing before them now was the one who had addressed them on their approach or another. The Vedala was a small, furry creature, utterly inoffensive looking. It reminded Kirk of the pictures he had seen of the extinct aye-aye of Terran tropical forests.

Kirk looked around, found he was standing before a grassy knoll that formed a crude but comfortable-looking seat. Either Kyle had been inhumanly precise in his calculations or the Vedala had somehow seen to it they set down where they were wanted.

For the moment, Kirk's attention was wholly drawn to the representative of the ages-old race standing in front of them.

The Vedala made a gesture. Kirk blinked, stared. The grass around them was no longer flat and empty. Now he saw several other grassy knolls arranged in a semi-circle around the Vedala. They were occupied, and their occupants were neither human nor Vedala.

"Welcome, Captain James Kirk and Commander Spock," the Vedala intoned solemnly, turning Kirk's attention away from the other knolls. The creature spoke with a soft feminine contralto, which was at once reassuring and forceful. There was nothing fragile about it, and its strength belied the appearance of the toylike being who produced it. There was the power of millennia behind it. Kirk paid attention.

"I will introduce you to the others," the Vedala continued. It gestured first to a far knoll on which a winged humanoid rested, leathery wings fluttering uneasily against the too-near earth. The creature stood over two and a half meters high. Kirk recognized it from tridee tapes, though he had never met a representative of the Skorr before.

"This is Tchar," the Vedala told them, "Hereditary Prince of the Skorr, master of the Eyrie."

It was a measure of the strength of Tchar's character that Kirk and Spock paid any attention to him at all, considering the mountain that snuffled and grunted next to him. This butte of intelligent protoplasm the Vedala identified as one Sord. The reptile snorted a greeting. He very much resembled the bipedal dinosaurs who had dominated a long-dead piece of Earth's chaotic past.

But the forehead here was high, the forelimbs ending in hands with opposable thumb and fingers, the intelligence self-evident. Nor was Sord from a world like Earth. His body was bulkier than would be needed there, muscles on muscles the sign of a heavy-planet dweller.

The Vedala went on to the third member of the group, and for a moment Kirk and Spock failed to notice it, their eyes

adjusted to creatures the size of Sord.

In direct contrast to its massive neighbor, it sat shivering on its grassy chair, trying to withdraw into the loam. Before the Vedala could proceed it interrupted, its voice thin and breathless.

Multiple cilia in place of upper limbs rippled nervously, goggle eyes darted from side to side in perpetual search for avenue of escape. "I was sentenced to this mad expedition," the asthenic ambassador announced, "I don't like it here. It's too quiet. I don't like any of you - no offense intended - I just wish I were back home in my city burrow."

"City cell is the correct appellation, I believe," the Vedala finally managed to say. "Em-three-green - an expert picklock and thief of extraordinary though peculiar talents, when he is not too terrified to demonstrate them.

"Em-three-green's people are...," the Vedala hesitated ever so slightly, "...of an extremely cautious bent."

"We're cowards, you mean," corrected Em-three-green, not defiantly, of course - that would have been utterly out of character. "And I," he finished almost proudly, "am the biggest coward of all. I want to go home."

"Oh, shut up. I'm sick of your belly-aching!" broke in a disgusted, very human-sounding voice from the ciliated safecracker's right. Em-three-green uttered a sharp whimper, tried to bury himself even deeper into the grass.

"This," the Vedala continued, indicating a young female humanoid, "is Lara." She was clad in a tight-fitting, multi-pocketed one-piece tunic that covered her from neck to ankle.

"Lara is a huntress from a people who are natural hunters. She also possesses a unique talent - a flawless sense of direction which is as real to her as sight or hearing are to you. A necessary skill for where you are going."

"I was about to bring that up myself," Kirk replied. "We're going someplace, then? I was instructed only to place myself

and my ship under your direction. We were told nothing more ... not even the fact that this expedition is to be multi-racial in makeup."

"Nor were any of these others," the Vedala informed him expansively. "This was done to preserve secrecy."

"You know as much now as we do," Lara added sharply. She looked toward the Vedala. "Who are these new ones?"

"Human and Vulcan," the Vedala informed her, with distressing matter-of-factness. "Mr. Spock was chosen for his analytical ability and overall scientific expertise. Captain Kirk, for his qualities of leadership and initiative, and a remarkably high survival quotient.

"There is, as you others know, one among you who knew by necessity the reason for bringing you here and the purpose to which your diverse abilities shall be put. Tchar will explain the mission, Captain Kirk, as he has to the others."

The Skorr rose, wings fluttering more violently. The words came out in a steady stream, in short, clipped phrases underlaid with controlled fury.

"Two or three centuries ago, humans, my people the Skorr were purely a warrior race. Our entire racial energies were bent to achieving one goal - a perfected militaristic society. This drive, coupled with our ability to reproduce rapidly, soon made us a threatening force in our sector of the galaxy.

"Today, we are a civilized people. Though we retain our military traditions and potential, we no longer live for war and destruction. All this has come about because of...," and he traced an abstract design in the air, his voice turning reverent, "...Alar."

"I know the name," Kirk recalled, nodding thoughtfully. "A religious leader with a reputation that extends beyond the Skorr."

"Our salvation and teacher," Tchar intoned solemnly. "He brought peace to us by showing how we might reconcile our

violent desires with civilization, how we could direct our energies into constructive paths. He brought realization to the Skorr." Again he performed the peculiar, vaguely figure-eightish gesture.

"The complete brain patterns of this Alar," the Vedala explained, "were recorded by his apostles before his death and sealed in a flawless piece of sculpted indurite."

"And it has been stolen!" Tchar shrilled, wings flaring upward in anger. "Our soul, the soul of the Skorr peoples, has been taken from us!"

"To an outsider," the Vedala continued, "the effect of this theft on the Skorr verges on the inexplicable. The reaction has been extreme, violent, and uncontrolled. Thus, what this Alar was able to achieve in so short a time seems all the more remarkable.

"The Skorr have always been...," the Vedala coughed delicately, "a paranoid race. Hence the havoc the disappearance of the soul has wrought among them. Exertions by others, most notably by the Vedala, for moderation in reaction have been ignored by the Skorr, whose latent belligerence has waited only for a cause to rise again to the fore. They now have that cause - though they would deny any desire to return to their ancient ways.

"Denials avail nought against the storm the theft has raised among them. Despite the fact that neither the thief nor the reason for the theft are known, the Skorr are preparing for war."

"But if the thief isn't known," Kirk objected, "who do they prepare against?"

"Since no Skorr could even conceive such blasphemy," Tchar informed him bitterly, "the abomination was clearly carried out by non-Skorr. That is whom my people prepare against. They will go to war with the rest of the known Galaxy and fight until they are no longer able to make war - or until there are none left to make war against. Unless - the soul is returned."

Shocked silence - eventually punctuated by a series of basso whoops from the bulky Sord. Lara the huntress smiled.

Kirk started to smile, too, until he noticed that not only wasn't Spock amused, he appeared unusually grim. He considered. The Vedala had made no move to counter what sounded on the surface like an outrageous claim - therefore, perhaps it might not be quite so outrageous.

After all, what *did* they know about the Skorr, whose numerous worlds lay dozens of parsecs from the nearest Federation planet?

"It is a very real danger," Spock murmured. "Extrapolating from the most recently obtained figures, the existing Skorr population could breed an army of two hundred billion within a few years, with weapons technology to match. In the Skorr, fertility is tied to the aggressive instinct. The more anger generated, the more the population swells.

"According to the information supplied by Tchar and the Vedala, the Skorr now have the incentive to breed exponentially."

"But to fight the entire Galaxy - surely they couldn't win," the incredulous Lara objected.

"No, but what has that to do with it?" Tchar countered sadly. "You still fail to comprehend the mental state into which my people have been driven. Death now means nothing. Revenge, assuaging their anger - that has become all.

"No, my people could not win such a war, but what would that mean to the millions who would die, Skorr and non-Skorr? Fortunately, there are those among us who can still control their anger enough to realize what a jihad would mean to the Galaxy. But they can restrain the fury only so long, before they too are drowned in it and carried along by the madness.

"We *must* recover the soul before these final bastions of reason crumble!"

Kirk turned to the silent Vedala. "And there's no hint of who stole the soul?"

"None," the Vedala replied.

"It is hard to understand," Tchar told them. "What other race stands to profit from such a cataclysm? Yet to provoke such seems the only possible motive for the theft. Unless, of course, it was carried out by the mad."

"Insanity," the Vedala observed, "is possessed of and by its own motivations. The keys to unraveling such convoluted reasoning are merely less obvious. We have not been able to discover them."

The Vedala made its equivalent of a shrug.

"Someone, somewhere, may be furious beyond reason - at what, no one knows. Or the theft may be part of a grandiose suicide wish. None of this concerns us in the least. What does concern us very much is that such a war may hinder the free movement of the Vedala through space. Hence, we are involved."

"The Vedala," Kirk shot back, "are known to possess certain technological abilities beyond the combined talents of our Federation and other governments. Why don't you -"

The Vedala held up a restraining hand. "We prefer not to interfere directly. Also, there are indications that, were we to do so, whoever has stolen the soul would take steps to destroy it. We can direct, however, and suggest."

"All right," Kirk agreed. "If you can't take part openly, and you've no idea who engineered the theft, do you have any hints to the present location of the soul?"

Turning, the Vedala struck at empty air. At least, it looked empty. Whether the gesture somehow activated some invisible switch, Kirk couldn't tell. The Vedala were known to encourage confusion in others. It was a matter of protective coloration: what cannot be comprehended is difficult to coerce.

Whatever the method, the gesture resulted in the appearance of a large holographic projection. It drifted in mid-air in the center of the semicircle, just behind the Vedala. And as they watched, it moved and changed.

A star in space was all that was shown, at first. Then the star grew nearer, larger. Three planets were shown circling round it. Again they were drawn into the projection, which drew near to the middle world.

"The mad world," the Vedala announced, for the first time something like fear appearing amid that invulnerable calm. "See how it all writhes?"

Now they were plunging headlong toward the surface, now wheeling up to run parallel to it in a long, steady scan. A scan that revealed roiling, heaving plateaus; violently unstable crust; volcanos erupting, to be promptly enclouded by multiple cyclones; mountains upthrusting. Vortices of strange glowing gases suddenly appeared in a seemingly normal atmosphere, only to dissipate in minutes. Hail was supplanted by a rain of fiery ash.

"The recording you are seeing," the Vedala said quietly, "is being rebroadcast at normal speed."

Kirk whistled, leaned over to whisper to Spock. "And I thought the Terratin world was bad!"

Spock nodded agreement. "There are indications that the planet in question may be somewhat unsuitable for habitation."

Kirk muffled a reply as the Vedala spoke again.

"Seismically unstable, with radical seismic activity and unpredictable tremors. A most inimical climate. Severe tidal disturbances caused by the unceasing action of five moons possessed of the most perverse orbits - the list is endless, beings. The globe is a compendium of catastrophes. The temperature varies from twenty degrees Kelvin to two oh four above."

The Vedala made another gesture, causing the projection to shrink in size without disappearing completely. Kirk looked around the semicircle, saw with relief that here was something everyone present could agree on. All showed attitudes of respect.

"Somewhere on that world," the Vedala went on, "the soul of Alar is hidden." Again that odd hesitation, that hint of a crack in the pose of racial perfection.

"Three expeditions have so far attempted to locate and recover it. Three expeditions have so far disappeared. More care than before has gone into choosing the members of the fourth - yourselves.

"*If* you consent to participate. We will force no one."

The alternative, of course - Kirk smiled to himself. That threat was enough to persuade any rational being to want to help.

"Naturally, Mr. Spock and I will go," he said.

The Vedala looked gratified, offered no thanks, then looked around at the others. Sord grunted as though it made no difference to him one way or the other. Em-three-green might have declined, but was too thoroughly terrified to do more than shiver violently on his grassy knoll.

Lara acknowledged with a sharp whistle, while Tchar's participation was apparently taken for granted.

"Seems we're agreed," Kirk observed.

"Then it is done," said the Vedala simply.

What happened then was in retrospect sufficiently impressive to outweight any suspicion of obfuscatory technique. The Vedala began to glow, expanding, changing to a collage of misty particles.

At the same time the holograph enlarged. It swallowed the Vedala-mist, but didn't stop there. They were submerged in it.

It flooded out the view of the garden around them. The sound of the littie stream became a roar.

An unseen, unfelt torrent he could only hear washed over him and he felt himself falling, falling. Like being in a transporter operating somehow at a fifth normal speed - that was it.

Vision returned to him the same way, slowly, things coming into focus with painful patience. Globs of light and color gradually took on form and shape around him.

Minutes, and the globs had turned into rugged mountains, rain, vast glaciers filling narrow gorges, glowering storm clouds. The dull drone in his ears split into winds buffeting his body, the patter of raindrops on naked stone, and the violent hissing of volcanic ash and lava meeting an advancing river of ice. Kirk was stunned to see that the glacier advanced fast enough that the movement could actually be seen.

He turned slowly.

They had been set down on a broad, flat rock of immense size, utterly devoid of any growth whatsoever. Mountains towered on three sides. Bracing himself, Kirk leaned into the wind. Presumably this was the stablest place the Vedala could find to set them down at. Until he saw the cart, he wondered if the Vedala expected them to find and recover the soul with bare hands and intuition.

The crude-looking wheeled vehicle seemed hardly to represent the zenith of Vedalan technology. But closer study revealed it was designed with typical Vedala cunning. Most of its capabilities were concealed behind the awkward-looking exterior.

To fool any potential attackers, undoubtedly.

Kirk recognized the basic design of the compact drive system. It would drive the cart up anything other than a vertical face. The suspension system was of matching sophistication. Kirk hoped the on-board equipment had been prepared with equal thoughtfulness.

A shrill cry came down to him from above. Leaning back, he saw that Tchar was now in his element - whirling, diving, coming down finally to hover just above them.

"I cannot feel the soul!" he screamed angrily. "It is nowhere near. We have been tricked!"

"I think not," Spock disagreed, raising his voice only enough to rise above the smothering susurration of the wind. "Consider that the surface of this planet is in constant flux. The Vedala warned us of this. I would guess they have provided us with some means of determining the proper direction."

Kirk had already mounted the cart and was examining the protected instruments. There were plenty, and it took him time to sort out the various controls. They had been designed for use by creatures with all kinds of different manipulative members. But the drive controls were not what finally drew a smile from him, but rather the very instrumentation Spock had suggested they would find.

Kirk became aware of motion beside him, saw that Em-three-green stood there, staring under his arm. Finding himself detected, the little alien hastily moved away on the pretext of studying other controls. Apparently he found any close scrutiny threatening.

Kirk moved to the railing, saw that Sord and Lara had joined the argument.

"All right, save your breath, friends. There's directional equipment on board and it's already tuned. Guess what it's been tuned to?"

"Refined indurite," Spock said without hesitation.

"Exactly."

"Then why not tell us that before, instead of riskin' anything like dissension?" Lara wondered.

"The Vedala," Kirk explained, "probably don't want to take any chance on our starting out overconfident. Putting us down here mentally naked was putting us down alert."

"Small worry of overconfidence," Em-three-green grumbled from behind him. "I can operate this machine, Captain Kirk."

"That's all right, Em," Kirk told him. "I'll manage it."

"No, let me, Captain," the little safecracker protested, with a rare show of determination. "I will feel useful, we will get where we are going faster, and," he added sofdy, "it will help keep my mind off this spine-lined burrow of a world."

Kirk nodded, watched as Em-three-green clambered into the control seat and touched controls with deft assurance. Instantly, a smooth rumble sounded beneath them, rose to a roar of power before settling down to a steady hum.

Spock climbed aboard, moved to examine the directional instrumentation. Kirk bent to give Lara a hand up. Grinning, she made a startling leap, grabbed the railing with both hands and pulled herself up.

That left only Sord. Kirk eyed him uncertainly and was rewarded by a bellowing laugh.

"There's room for you in the back, Sord."

"No," he boomed, "you little ones ride if you wish." The shovel-like head moved like a crane to take in the landscape. "I like this place - it's got variety. And I would crowd you."

Kirk studied the glacier, fascinated. Now it appeared to be retreating visibly.

"Captain," Spock called.

Kirk walked over, his attention going immediately to the small glowing screen the first officer was working with. A grid lay over the lit rectangle, beneath which a web of flexible lines weaved and pulsed. Abruptly they shrunk to a single, pulsing dot.

"It would seem our direction is clearly indicated," Spock observed.

Even as he spoke, the carefully aligned grid suddenly shifted, the dot expanding into a loose maze of questing lines racing crazily across the screen. A red glow began to suffuse the clear plexalloy.

"The position is shifting," Spock commented, "I think..."

Em-three-green leaned over from the pilot's chair. When he got a look at the screen, his already wide eyes bulged enormously.

"Shifting - the control elements are unphasing!" As the solid lines of the grid began to break up, Em screamed and jumped out of the chair to dive behind the metallic bulk of the engine.

A whistling sound began, rose rapidly in volume. Small whisps of smoke appeared from behind the screen's upper corners. The whistle began to pulse alarmingly.

Spock glanced at Kirk, whereupon both men dropped to the deck. Thus they were missed by the flying shards of acrylic and metal which screamed by overhead as the screen blew up.

Getting to their feet slowly, they grimly eyed the smoking, sparking ruin that had been their one hope for tracking down the soul. "What did the Vedala call it?" Kirk muttered tightly. "The mad planet?" He gestured disgustedly at the ruined instrumentation.

"How do you explain that, Spock?"

"A confluence of unbenign electronic forces," the first officer responded slowly.

"In other words, you don't know?"

"Precisely," Spock confessed.

"Doesn't matter."

Kirk turned, stared at Lara. She grinned.

"I know the way," she said. "I got a good look at that thing before it went mockers." She turned, cocked her head slightly without losing the grin and nodded in a direction slightly to the southwest. Her voice was matter-of-fact, confident. "That way."

A querulous inquiry drifted down from above: "Are you certain, human?" questioned a hovering Tchar.

"For sureness, birdman," Lara threw back. "I can't be fooled about directions and I can't get lost. That's why I'm here." She pointed again, downslope and out of the mountains. "It's that way, or I'll eat my kill-boots."

"The Vedala would not have chosen Lara had her abilities been less than perfect," Spock commented.

"So then," Kirk observed, "we know which way we're supposed to go - but we're meant to travel on the ground. An overview could be very helpful." He glanced upward significantly.

Tchar's wings spread wide and he beat downward to gain altitude. "I will scout ahead," he replied simply. Beginning a wide circle that brought him into the up-drafts sweeping up the granite flanks close by, he soared effortlessly higher.

Spock studied his progress for a long moment, then looked idly over at Kirk. "I will acquaint myself with our supplies." He moved toward the rear of the cart and the metal cabinets bolted to the deck there.

Lara watched him go, moved a step nearer Kirk. "Vulcans," she muttered. "Never liked 'em much myself. Cold-blooded critters, every one of 'em. Not an ounce of real feelin' in the whole pack."

"I wouldn't be quite so harsh," Kirk objected. "Especially on Mr. Spock. He's something of a unique personality."

"But not human, like you and me," she said huskily, eyeing him boldly.

Kirk said nothing, stared back in disapproval. She wasn't intimidated.

"Look, maybe you got different customs where you come from, Captain. My world, there's a lot of women, not so many men. When we find a man attractive, we say so." If anything, her gaze grew even less inhibited. "I'm sayin' so. How do you find me?"

"Fascinating and not a little overwhelming," he replied, responding to the frontal assault with complete honesty. "The only problem is, we're not here on a pleasure trip."

"All the more reason to take whatever pleasure there might be in it." She laughed, brushed teasingly close and walked to stand at the front of the cart.

Kirk studied her progress, the supple form and smooth stride. A host of alternating images melted together in his mind to form a single, highly confusing whole.

The muted hum rose in volume as Em-three-green got the cart moving. It lurched down the gentle slope in the direction Lara had indicated. Sord loped along just ahead, his movements cumbersome, awkward - irresistible.

"I've checked out the supplies, Captain."

"Hmmm - what?" Kirk mumbled absently.

"The supplies, Captain, I have completed an inventory," Spock repeated, slightly more forcefully. Kirk finally turned his attention to his first officer. Spock made a show of clearing his throat, continued.

"As expected, the life-support material is more than adequate. There are specific provisions for Sord, Tchar, and Em-three-green. And - there are weapons."

"Against what would we need weapons?" Kirk mused. "I thought the only hostility we were expected to encounter arose out of the planet itself? There's not supposed to be any native life here - unless the Vedala plan another surprise for us."

"I would not rule out anything at this stage, Captain. Judging from the Vedala's outspoken aversion to this world, it would not surprise me to discover that their preliminary survey of it was less than all-inclusive. We have the evidence of three previously unsuccessful expeditions to back this." He scanned the overcast, threatening landscape pessimistically.

"Nor are they, by their own admission, omnipotent. We must rely on our own abilities, I think. Overmuch reliance on Vedalan intervention may have doomed our predecessors here." He nodded toward the horizon.

"To steal something like the soul of Alar and then depend wholly on mechanicals to safeguard it strikes me as unworthy of any beings capable of devising such a theft in the first place. Also illogical. I suspect that before we regain possession of the soul, we may have to deal with those immoral beings personally."

Kirk murmured agreement and turned to contemplate the terrain ahead. Spock had only recited the obvious, yet it seemed as if the pulverized stone that crunched steadily beneath the wheels of the cart now whispered imperceptible threats at every turn of an axle, and unknown forms of extinction paced them while staying just out of sight.

In all this world, he sensed not a hint of welcome. He would be glad when they left it. Or if...

II

Eventually the slope leveled out and the mountains sank beneath the horizon behind. Gravel and rock gave way to a broad, flat, desertlike plain of sand and fine, soft stone. Only scattered monoliths of black basalt broke the gently rolling plateau, volcanic plugs - the mummified hearts of long-eroded fire-spitters. Fortunately the cloud-laden sky cut much of the daytime heat, or they would have been broiled quite thoroughly. In fact, a brisk breeze had sprung up and now blew coolingly in their faces.

A short, violent chuff brought them to a halt. Sord snorted again and pointed ahead with a finger the size of a man's thigh.

"Now what could that be?" Everyone stared into the distance.

Moving in their direction was what looked like a solid curtain of dark gray. The breeze freshened and beat at them with increasing intensity. Kirk glanced questioningly at their furry driver.

"Em, is there a top to this thing?"

"I don't know," the little alien replied fearfully. He started hunting among as yet unused controls.

"I think so ... no, that's not it ... nor that..." The gray wall had moved nearer and was now charging down upon them.

"If there is, you'd better find it fast," Kirk warned. He yelled ahead. "I hope when you said you liked variety, you mean a broad definition of the word, Sord." The huge reptile did not reply. He was staring at the approaching wall.

The deluge reached them moments later, a rain of seeming solid intensity. Kirk had experienced a downpour like this only once before, on a deceptive world in the Taurean system. He and Spock had heen in the jug there, too.

Em-three-green finally unraveled the mystery sequence involved and got the translucent canopy up, just before they would have been washed away.

Lara wrung water from her hair, smiled radiantly beneath the damp strands. "*Real* weather."

"And a half," Kirk agreed readily, looking out through one of the clear ports. "You'd almost think -"

Before he could finish the thought, the rain stopped - as abruptly as a curse, to be replaced by a blaze of sunlight. Clouds began to form immediately, but under the attack of the sudden inferno, broad shallow lakes disappeared before their eyes, hissing, all but boiling off the sand.

Where vision had been obscured seconds earlier by a solid wall of water, now the landscape shivered and rippled under agonizing heat. Distortion waves added ridges and hills to the desert where none existed. And the distortions were suddenly multiplied as a faint quake shook the cart.

"We'll all die here!" Em-three-green wailed as he put down the canopy. Every one of his many cilia were locked to a control or structural segment of the cart.

"A statistical probability," was Spock's uninspiring comment. Lara eyed him disgustedly.

"Don't you ever act on anything besides your precious statistics, Vulcan?"

"Yes, but philosophy does not appear to be an adequate vehicle on which to base a course of action here," he replied unperturbed. "Nor do I find reliance on instinct satisfactory, as you seem to."

"Oh well," she shrugged, "to each his own."

Further discussion was interrupted by a shrill keening from above. A faint spot appeared, resolved into a slim, limber body centered between a pair of bat-wings - Tchar. Kirk wondered for a second how the birdman had survived the fury of the momentary monsoon, then realized he must have climbed above it.

"I can see something far ahead," he shouted down to them, "it's...," and his last words faded into inaudibility as he banked and glided down to land atop the next rise.

Em-three-green swung the cart neatly against the base of the low hill Tchar had perched on. It was a short climb for the rest of them.

The object which had excited Tchar's concern was far enough away to be little more than a hazy outline. It was impressive nonetheless.

A simple cube of some black material, the structure sat utterly alone at the bottom of the vast sink. A sense of its enormity penetrated all the way to the valley's rim - though Kirk couldn't be certain just how large it was. The object was still too far away to judge accurately.

It also, he noted, lay exactly along the line Lara had indicated.

Tchar was fluttering, hopping about on the sand nervously. "I sense it, I can feel it - the soul of Alar is down there!"

A gigantic rumble shook the earth behind them, and the ground shivered in pain. Lara whirled, shouted something in shock that was drowned by Em-three-green's screams and Sord's locomotive whistle.

With absolutely no warning, a fountain of black ash and smoke had exploded from the ground. Like a film running at thrice normal speed, the crevice widened, expanded: then a half-formed volcano erupted skyward. In seconds, it was a hundred meters high and growing with incredible speed.

A crack appeared in the southwest cliff of the cinder cone. A stream, then a river of syrupy red-orange lava poured from

the flank eruption. It rushed toward them like a wave of red-hot sand. The pressure below, Kirk knew, must have been enormous to produce such a voluminous flow in so short a time.

They hardly had enough time to realize how precarious their present position was. They sat on a slight rise, but one that was still well below the level of the cinder cone. It would wash this tiny summit clean before the flow subsided.

"It seems that everything happens with remarkable speed on this world," Spock observed. "We may expect volcanic action at any time."

"I can see that, Mr. Spock. Question is, how do we go on remaining observers?"

"The Vedala made you the nominal leader here, Kirk," Lara admonished him. "You think of a way out."

"We have several minutes before the flow reaches us," Spock commented easily. "Plenty of time."

Not enough, it seemed, for Em-three-green. Whether it was the molten death racing toward them or Spock's seeming indifference toward it no one knew, but the little alien let out a pitiful screech and dashed down the slope to cower between the huge wheels of the cart.

Lara eyed Spock as if he were personally responsible for the approaching disaster, then she loped down to try and comfort Em. Sord huffed once, sat down on the sand and engaged in some steady nonverbalization of his own.

"I must point out, Captain," Spock went on, "that the vehicle we have been provided with lacks sufficient speed to escape so rapid a flow." He peered into the distance. "I also estimate that the flow is too wide for us to outflank."

"Not entirely true, Spock. We can still outrun it - if we let the engine draw maximum, unhindered power. I know this type. There's enough energy there to run circles around that flow."

"One high speed might be possible," Spock conceded. "But the power leads must be rerun, certain safeguards removed, emergency insulation installed. The total readjustment is complex and time consuming."

"Can't you handle it, Spock?" The first officer hesitated, finally shook his head.

"I know what is involved, Captain, but I have not the skill to perform so complex and complete an operation in so short a - "

"Excuse me for interrupting." They both turned, looked down to see the still shaking form of Em-three-green staring up at them. "I have some skill at digital manipulation. I can do it in time, I think, if," he gazed evenly at Spock, "you can direct me as fast as I can work, sir."

"Still not enough time," Spock insisted.

"We might be able to divert the lava flow temporarily, Spock," Kirk suggested. They had started down toward the cart. Em-three-green was already laying out the tools he would require. He glanced back over his shoulder. "Tchar, see if there's a suitable place."

The Skorr shrilled acknowledgment and launched himself into the pumice-darkened sky.

"Such a diversion would be at best of short duration, Captain, unless the flow of molten rock lessens significantly. It shows no sign of doing so."

"You worry about reprograming the cart engine, Spock, and let me worry about the lava."

They stared at each other a long moment, then Spock nodded. "Quickly then," he yelled to Em-three-green. Kirk noticed that he didn't bother to question the alien's abilities. Em-three-green had better be able to do what he claimed, and that was all there was to it.

Spock had the protective panel over the engine housing off in seconds. A moment sufficed to satisfy him as to its contents.

"This is Federation equipment," he told the tool-laden Em-three-green, "can you...?"

"Anything anyone put together I can take apart," the little alien piped firmly. "We're wasting time."

Spock simply nodded, began: "Terminal M-three red leads to diode channel twenty-seven, cross-connects to CCa-fourteen ... taking care not to break the fluid-state sealed component Three-R..."

Em-three-green's cilia were a blur. Spock experimentally stepped up the pace and the little alien kept pace easily, rearranging and realigning the critical instrumentation as fast as Spock could recite instructions.

Spock was willing to concede as how they now had an outside chance at survival - but still outside!

"Capain Kirk!" Kirk looked upward, away from the work in progress on the cart, to see Tchar hovering overhead.

"There is a ravine," the flyer shouted, "sixty meters to your left." Kirk stared in the indicated direction and spotted the slight break in the ridge between them and the volcano, which roared on unabated.

"I see it."

"If it can be blocked," Tchar said, even as Kirk came to the same conclusion, "the lava will flow past and have to top the ridge to reach us. It will save some time."

"Good enough." He turned. "Sord?"

"I heard him," the organic mountain grumbled. Elephantine legs working smoothly, he lifted himself from the sand and lumbered off toward the ravine. Kirk and Lara followed as fast as they could, Lara politely slowing to keep pace with the slower Kirk.

"Carefully, Em-three-green," Spock warned, perceiving what he thought to be a just-missed movement on the part of the alien that would have caused a fatal short. One improper connection, one mixing of supercooled fluids, one wrong touch of an instrument on a live component, and the cart could go up in pieces - along with its present pair of occupants.

"I know, I know," Em-three-green muttered softly. "I'm trying to be as careful as possible at this speed. Please try not to make me nervous."

Spock returned to the dull, steady drone of instructions. He forebore to mention that Em-three-green's impossibly rapid, seemingly haphazard style of making the most delicate adjustments was making him not a little uneasy himself.

Sord was containing his impatience with difficulty by the time Lara and a wheezing, puffing Kirk finally arrived at the far end of the ravine.

Lara didn't bother to rest; instead she scrambled spiderlike up a sheer cliff. She looked toward the volcano, then back down at them and made hurrying gestures.

Kirk took out his phaser. Adjusting it for tight-beam, high-intensity work, he began slicing huge chunks of rock from the opposing cliff face. He was cutting at another piece before the first gigantic slab of sandstone crashed to the ground.

Sord put his sternum against the boulder, slipped both hands around and under, and shoved. By the time Kirk had another block cut from the ravine wall, the huge reptile had the first one set in place.

Cut and place, place and cut, while Lara shouted constantly at them to hurry.

The mouth of the arroyo was finally sealed, faster than Kirk would have believed possible. He hadn't counted on Sord's incredible strength and endurance. They still had some time, so he busied himself cutting smaller fragments. Sord used them to chink small gaps in the main boulders.

They stopped only when Lara's anxious cry of "Here it comes, get out!" reached them.

As Kirk turned and ran, he could hear the nearing hiss from the lava as it sizzled over the sand. He glanced backward, like Lot's wife - and fell.

A moment later the sand was rushing past beneath him. Sord had scooped him up and was carrying him easily in both hands. Behind them the hiss rose to a furious, tense, spitting sound. Sord reached the end of the ravine and felt confident enough to turn and stare.

Jets of molten stone squirted between the uncaulked chinks in the makeshift dam. The topmost boulder seemed to quiver a little at the impact and slide backward slightly. But it didn't fall.

Lara pulled up next to them, panting from the run. She looked from Kirk back to the dam.

"Workin' real nice. For a minute there I wasn't sure it was goin' to hold. The flow's spreading sideways now, though. The lava in the cracks is cooling fast, cementing the whole job."

"How soon before the flow reaches the ridge-top?" he asked.

"Soon enough - but it doesn't matter. I've got our escape route."

"It better be a direct one." He gestured back toward the dam. Sparks were already dancing above it. They had a few extra minutes at most before the lava reached it and flowed down toward them once more.

A shout behind them. They turned in time to see the huge cart send up a shower of sand as Em-three-green swung it to a stop.

"The drive has been reprogramed - expertly," Spock announced. "Quickly, Captain. I do not know how long it will last."

They raced for the ladder as Tchar swooped low, spiraled overhead. Kirk hustled aboard, with Lara right behind. A rumbling query sounded behind him.

"Captain, I'm afraid that while I'm near to being invulnerable, I am not immune to the effects of molten rock. I fear I must crowd you temporarily."

"Get aboard, Sord," Kirk told him. "We'll manage." He and Lara moved to the front of the cart. Spock joined them there, leaving only Em-three-green near the back, at the drive controls.

Moving as quickly as possible but with infinite care, the great reptile struggled onto the rear of the cart. Even so, he nearly overturned it in the process.

"Careful, you monstrous scaly lump!" Em-three-green squeaked - out of fear, of course, not boldness.

"Move this machine, insect-eater," Sord countered disdainfully.

"Twenty-one degrees east," Lara ordered, pointing, "to take us out of the flow path. Then we can circle around and back toward the cube. I don't think -"

A titanic explosion shook the ground, nearly knocking everyone to the deck. Kirk looked behind them, was startled to see that a secondary cone had joined the first and was pouring out lava at a rate equal to its neighbor. The flow had suddenly doubled.

By tomorrow the abrupt action of wind, flood, and quake would probably have wiped out all signs of the entire eruption, he mused. They didn't have time to wait around and witness it. They didn't have even minutes.

The new eruption sent a shower of glowing sparks raining down on them. The engine roared, coughed, roared, coughed.

They weren't moving.

"Something is wrong!" Em-three-green shrieked, nearly losing his voice from panic. Behind them, a red-orange wave from the second cone surged against the ridge-top - flowed over and downhill. The added influx of fresh material was too much for the hastily erected dam. It collapsed. A stream of lava, topped with broken black crust, raced out and headed toward them.

"Quickly, quickly!" Tchar shouted down at them. "What's wrong?"

"I do not know." Em-three-green frantically studied gauge upon gauge, tried two dozen switches. "Something has caused the front shaft to lock. It must be - "

Spock was already over the side and ducking underneath the cart, tools in hand. Kirk raced to the railing, leaned over. Spock was out of sight.

"Spock?"

"One moment, Captain." A hysterical pause, then, "I have it. Sand has entered the mechanism through a broken lubrication seal. I'm cleaning it out and taping it, but it will clog again."

"Forget it, Spock, the power plant will have burned itself out by then." He looked to the ridge. The lava would reach them in three, maybe two minutes. "For Vulcan's sake, get back aboard!"

"A second, Captain. There, completed." Spock came into view, his hands and face smeared with some blue-tinted grease. At the same time, the first volcano regurgitated a plug of plutonic phlegm. A storm of fiery sparks and small globs of lava hailed down on them.

Kirk tried to cover up, as did everyone else. The bombardment passed quickly. He looked over the side again.

"Spock - Spock!"

The first officer was sprawled on the ground like a broken doll. One hand fluttered feebly at his head.

Kirk didn't think. Both hands on the cart rail, he vaulted over the side and landed with a jar on the sand. He rolled Spock onto his back.

"Leave," he muttered painfully, "all of you ... go."

"Not without you," Kirk objected.

"Captain, I..."

Kirk got a shoulder under an arm, lifted Spock to his feet. "No, Sord, stay aboard. It'll take too long for you to get back on." Kirk staggered toward the ladder.

"Tell Captain...," Spock was mumbling, "...get others away."

"We're *all* getting away," Kirk whispered. Another explosion sent fire down on them. The odor of sulfur had grown nauseating. This time, no one was hit except Sord, who simply brushed the sizzling embers off his hide. Lava bombs the size of the one that had struck Spock he didn't even feel.

Em-three-green was gesturing hysterically at the approaching river of flame, screaming. Even Lara's reserve seemed ready to crack. Sord eyed the flow, then leaned over slowly. The cart creaked, supports and axles groaned. The wheels on the cart's opposite side rose off the sand. Em-three-green was too terrified to scream as the vehicle tilted precariously.

A massive paw grabbed Spock around the waist and lifted him onto the cart.

"Go!" Kirk screamed, clinging to the ladder.

Fear lent even more speed to Em-three-green's incredible reaction time. A roar of power drowned out even the sound of the closing lava as the cart's engine, rigged to permit it to pull energy unrestrainedly from the power pack, cut loose.

Kirk felt himself wrenched backward, locked arms and legs around the ladder and prayed the metal would last as long as his muscles. The front of the cart rose into the air from the force of the blast as it shot forward at an incredible turn of

speed. Em-three-green adjusted controls, all four wheels hit the sand, and it shot down the slope seconds before an advancing cliff of red covered the spot where they had been.

Lava boiled angrily behind them, orange talons reaching after. But the flow was receding rapidly into the distance. Drive whining madly, wheels and axles spinning at a rate for which they had not been designed, the wagon raced away from the burning crest behind. Sparks were starting to fly from anguished components.

Tchar watched as the cart below reached the gap in the slope Lara had indicated. It raced through, over another slope and down a winding ravine, narrowly scraping stone walls and abutments. Here the downward slope of the land lay to the south instead of toward the black cube. The lava river would slam up against the ridge they had just raced over and turn harmlessly to the left.

At the end of this pleasant thought, there was a violent, grinding wail from the engine, mirrored by one from Em-three-green. He shut everything down with incredible speed, still not fast enough to reduce the shower of sparks now spitting from more and more sections of the car.

"Off, off, off, everyone off!" the little alien cried, even as he was running for the ladder. Flames began to belch from sealed innards.

With Sord carrying the still dazed Spock, they hurriedly abandoned the smoking cart. Taking shelter behind the first rank of sand dunes, Kirk turned, could make out a thin line of red orange flowing to the south. He turned his attention back to the cart. The expected explosion failed to materialize. Em-three-green had cut the power in time to keep anything from reaching dangerous overload and blowing itself to bits. Whether he had done so in time to keep the cart mobile was open to question.

Tchar glided down to a smooth landing next to them. The Skorr was panting heavily.

"I would like to know what the Vedala put in that cart, Captain. I could not fly fast enough to keep up with you."

"It was a standard Federation engine and drive system," Kirk told him. "The credit for its abnormal burst of speed goes to Mr. Spock and Em-three-green."

He glanced over at his first officer, who now stood unaided nearby. Spock said nothing, while Em looked embarrassed and tried to hide, the tips of his cilia running through a series of color changes.

"Close," Lara said into the awkward silence, staring toward the far river of lava.

"Far too close," agreed Spock. He was rubbing at the back of his head. "I prefer less substantial precipitation. And while I appreciate your actions on my behalf, Captain, your first duty should remain to the group and the mission."

"Quite right, Spock. I felt it paramount to maintain our expedition intact. Don't think anything as primitive as emotion entered into my decision." He made a movement over his chest. "Cross my heart and hope to die."

"The injection of humor," Spock began reprovingly, "does not obviate the fact that you risked the success of the mission to - "

"- save the best science officer in Starfleet," Kirk cut in.

A massive paw smote the sand between them. "Are you two going to argue each other's merits till I throw up, or do we get on with it."

Kirk grinned, turned to face the irritated reptile. "We -"

A blast of cold air hit them, staggered Kirk. Everyone looked back toward the volcanos. Neither peak could be seen. Both lay hidden somewhere behind and beneath the towering range of cumulo-nimbus clouds that had piled up out of nothing.

It seemed to be raining beneath the black cloudbank. "No, not raining," Kirk muttered to himself. Instead, the storm was putting forth a blizzard of considerable ferocity. A violent hissing sprang up from the land beneath the clouds - snow striking the lava. He shook his head, and wondered. A world most mad indeed! Mad was a mild adjective for this paranoid planet.

The dune, at least, would provide some slight protection. Everyone scrambled over to lie in the sheltering lee. The marching clouds caught them moments after.

"And I was just going to ask," Lara shivered, flapping her hands at her sides, "what next? Wish this place would make up its mind - a body can't find time to get comfortable here."

"We've no time to seek comfort," Kirk told her. "As Sord says, we've got to get on with it."

It took Em-three-green all of five minutes to determine that the cart wasn't going anywhere without several major repairs, for which they had been equipped with neither time, skill, nor parts. Kirk felt they could have managed the first two, but the matter of replacement components defeated him.

"Completely burned out," the tiny mechanic announced dolefully, his nose wrinkling at the pungent odor drifting up from the bowels of the engine housing.

Kirk sighed. "That means from here on we carry what we need."

No one voiced an objection, or an alternative. Kirk and Spock moved to the rear deck of the cart, opened the supply lockers, and began portioning out loads.

III

Kirk eyed the deceiving circle of the sun above, put his head down and into the wind. It had changed direction four, maybe five times since they'd begun the trek.

He'd been right about the deceptiveness of this world - and that included distance. It felt as if they had been walking for years without drawing any nearer to their objective.

Thanks to the intermittent blizzard and freezing rain, many sandy areas had acquired a thin plating of ice. Walking on such terrain was next to impossible. They couldn't have managed it at all had not Sord volunteered an obvious solution. As a result, the big reptile was soon carrying the bulk of their equipment on his back. Doing so did not slow him up any.

Eventually the last snow and rain ceased, but the cold wind continued to blow.

"I don't understand," Kirk muttered, "we should have been there long ago."

"Perhaps, Captain," Spock replied, "the defenses surrounding the soul include image projectors. What we may have seen from afar might have been a false construct."

"What about Lara's certainty of direction, then, and Tchar, insisting he sensed it?"

"That is so. It may only be a matter of distance, then." He looked thoughtful. "If none of the preceding three expeditions had one of Lara's people, or a Skorr, with them, that might

explain their demise. They could have hunted false projections in this malign wilderness forever."

Kirk paused, cupped his hands to his lips and yelled up into the chilled air.

"Tchar, see anything?"

A faint reply: "Wait..."

Tchar rose higher, stared into the distance. It was there, as he had known it would be - past tentacles and fields of ice-blocks at the bottom of the valley. A gigantic, featureless black monolith. He knew the soul of Alar lay within that ominous repository. They were on the course the humanoid Lara had indicated. He would have to tell the others.

"Yes!" He plunged downward, pulled up at the last second. "Ahead, Captain, it -" There was a low rumble, and he instinctively lifted off the ground. Kirk and Spock had no such ability and were knocked off their feet.

Somehow Lara kept her balance. Sord was not affected, of course.

"Another quake!" Lara cursed.

All around them was the horrible crunching sound of ice breaking up.

Someone screamed. All eyes turned toward Em-three-green. He had been trailing slightly behind. A vast ridge of ice had risen beneath him, cracked, twisted, opening crevices in the ice and in the earth below.

Using every cilium, Em-three-green tried to scramble clear. But the huge slab of ice was tilting sharply, and fine cilia are not equipped with claws or hooks. They found no purchase on the slick surface. Clawing frantically, he found himself sliding backward toward the abyss.

Everything happened fast, then. Spock took several long strides and threw himself stomach-first onto the ice near the

tilting slab. He slid to the edge of the crevice, reached out, and grabbed Em-three-green by the scruff of the neck just as the latter was sliding in. Kirk got there barely in time to grab Spock's ankles to prevent him from going in with Em-three-green.

With a doomsday groan, the enormous frozen mass crashed into the depths.

Kirk grimaced with the strain of holding both Spock and Em-three-green. He tried to dig his toes into the frozen sand, found himself to his horror sliding slowly, slowly forward.

A coil of rope flew over his head. He reached up, slipped the noose over Spock's legs. Immediately the cord went taut. He pulled himself to the lip of the crevasse, stared down past the dangling form of Spock to where Em-three-green still hung in the Vulcan's grasp, swaying slightly and moaning. His eyes were shut tight.

Kirk felt Spock's body moving backward, crawled along with it. A glance showed Sord carefully bringing in the cord. Then Tchar had taken Em-three-green's weight from Spock and the first officer was easily pulled clear.

They took a long break there - not because they were especially tired, but because Em-three-green was too frightened now to move. Spock administered the medicine they had found in the supplies, but that would take time to work, too.

If it could have any effect at all. For when Em's violent shaking had calmed sufficiently for him to talk, it became clear that their mechanic was now beyond even terror. It was reflected in his tired voice, his miserable attitude.

"I can't go on any farther," he barely managed to whisper.

Kirk bit back his instinctive reply. A more woebegone being he had never seen. No surprise, really - Em-three-green had been frightened and uncertain on the Vedala asteroid, let alone here. He had probably been pushed through more today

than any member of his race had been forced to endure in the past hundred years.

That he was still alive instead of dead from shock was proof enough he was a remarkable specimen of his type. Kirk eyed Em-three-green in a fresh light, took stock of their battered but still intact little company.

Sord sat invincible, a bored block of steel, ignoring the biting wind. Lara leaned against an ice-block, confident, athletic, secure in her knowledge of where she stood in relation to the universe, her lacquered exterior punctuated only by an occasional worried glance at Em-three-green.

Spock, nearby, was as calm as ever, ready for whatever might offer itself as an intriguing problem. And Tchar, free and safe as the air, hovered patiently above.

And himself, of course - concerned, anxious, but still in firm command. He shook his head again. He hadn't the slightest doubt that the finest representative of all the races present was the miserable lump of shivering cilia huddled in their middle and presently suffocating in his own misery and self-pity.

"I'm not even afraid anymore," the subject of Kirk's scrutiny murmured. "Just very, very tired. So very tired."

"Come on, Em," Lara urged with surprising gentleness. "We know where it is, and we've seen it. It's just a little further."

"No!" Em-three-green shouted, with uncharacteristic force, "I'm finished, I tell you! I've had enough. Let the *murvlgeed* Skorr go on their *gurvlmeed* jihad! Let the Galaxy blow itself to its assorted perditions, for all I care. I'm...," and the last word came out long and slow and low, "...*tired*."

Kirk tried to find a way to say what had to be said diplomatically, and came to a dead end. He firmed himself.

"I'm sorry, Em-three-green, but there's still the possibility we'll be needing you." He glanced up significantly. "Sord..."

Em-three-green had enough srength left to protest as he all but vanished in that massive paw. Sord placed him carefully on his already heavily loaded back. The picklock fought to his feet.

"Let me go, you outrageous hallucination!"

"Shut up and hang on," Sord muttered over his shoulder. His head was bigger than Em-three-green's entire body. "Dig down under the seal-tarp, between those boxes. You can get out of the cold and wind." He started off downslope at a steady trot.

"And be still! If you itch, I may forget the source and scratch you!"

"I'll scout on ahead," Tchar suggested, rising into the wind.

Kirk nodded absently as he, Spock and Lara fell in at Sord's flank. Above them, from under the edge of the tarp, a high voice muttered with an equal mixture of pain and pathos, "Some day, you grotesque blob of creation, I'm going to cut you down to size."

Sord did not deign to reply.

Wind faded and clouds ran. The sun returned to melt the ice under their feet - fast enough, fortunately, to prevent the formation of much mud. As soon as the earth had dried sufficiently, they continued on.

They entered a region of low, sandy hills and encountered for the first time some local vegetation - scrub bushes and the toughest looking grasses Kirk had ever seen. They'd have to be to survive here, he mused. Even the brush grew parallel to the ground instead of up into the unpredictable sky.

"Wait," came a rumbling warning.

Kirk moved up alongside Sord.

"What is it."

"Quiet." Kirk looked in the direction Sord was looking, toward a thicket of bushes. For a moment, he thought he saw what had given the reptile pause - something dark and vaguely sinister moving among the branches.

"What is it?"

"You espy it too, then?"

"I thought I saw something move, though it might have been wind action. Hell, on this world it might have been anything."

"So. There is not supposed to be any animal life on this planet."

Reptile and man stared harder, but there were no more hints of movement.

"I wouldn't be surprised if the plants themselves had learned how to run away from things here," Kirk commented. Sord continued to stare, finally grunted.

"Guess you're right. This world just gets on your nerves."

When they topped the next rise, the black cube loomed just ahead. But there were no cheers, no shouts, no cries of *eureka!* Everyone was too bone tired, emotionally and physically. They were resigned rather than elated, for now their mission really began. Or would those sheer walls of unmarked, unbroken black prove deceptively easy to penetrate? None of them thought so, in the depths of their various minds.

"I can sense the soul," Tchar told them. He fluttered his wings as he stood near Kirk. "This is no illusion - it is here!" He beat the air, lifted.

"I will fly round, examine the structure, and return to meet you. There may be an entrance above the ground. If so, I will find it far more easily than any of you." He soared upward.

"Tchar!" Kirk yelled.

The Skorr stalled, hovered.

"Captain?"

"Watch it - we need you, too."

Tchar paused, added thoughtfully, "I will be careful, Captain." He dipped slightly, then rose and shot falconlike toward the roof.

"Tchar is right in his analysis," Spock finally declared, "but we should continue to search at ground level, if only to find shelter from the next meteorological aberration."

"Excellent idea, Spock," Kirk agreed, starting toward the nearest wall, "I'll see you shortly."

"A moment, Captain. I -" Kirk cut him off curtly.

"Not this time, Spock. If something unexpected gobbles me up, dissolves me, or otherwise renders me in corpus kaput, we're going to need you around to figure out how it was done and then to devise a way to circumvent it."

Spock appeared ready to protest further.

"And that's an order," Kirk finished.

He started down the slope. Before he had gotten ten meters from the others, he felt a warm presence alongside - Lara.

"I'll go with you." It wasn't a question.

"Uh-uh, as long as I'm in charge you'll -"

"Don't *uh-uh* me, Kirk. Remember, scouting's sort of my job. By rights, I ought to be doin' this by myself. You've already gotten all the use out of my sense of direction you're goin' to. I'm more expendable than anyone. But if you want to join me in gettin' yourself shot at, well, it'll be nice to have company."

Kirk started to yell - then found the incipient lecture had turned into a mental smile that was mirrored on his face. They walked on together.

Spock, meanwhile, was trying to take his mind off the fact that Kirk was out ahead of them, out of range of immediate help, and nearing a structure they had every reason to believe contained hostile defenses ready for unannounced visitors.

"Sord, what did you think you saw back there?"

The massive brow frowned, forming a small facial crevasse. Its owner spoke without looking down.

"Don't know for sure, Vulcan. A shape -" Sord shook his head as if to clear it of a fog. Profound cogitation apparentiy wasn't one of his specialties. "Probably seeing things, as the captain figures."

Spock didn't look satisfied. "There should be no mobile life on this world." He started down determinedly after Kirk and Lara.

Em-three-green slipped off Sord's back, took two steps to every one of Spock's as he followed at his heels.

"You keep saying that, Spock."

"Yes," Spock admitted. The key word is 'shouldn't' The Vedala should have informed us."

Sord sighed, sounding like an ancient steam-engine, and followed too. "Maybe, the Vedala didn't know about whatever it was we saw."

"No, I still consider that an impossibility," Spock muttered.

"You think that," the dragon snorted. "Me, I ain't so sure. The longer I'm on this dump, the less I'm convinced of the omnipotence of our alien mentors. Now, mind you," he went on, "I'm just saying there are aspects of this they don't know nothing about.

"Leastwise, that's what I tell myself to explain why I'm here instead of them and their supposed super-science. I don't know what you tell yourself, Vulcan."

Spock glanced up at the toothed jaws but was unable to read any expression there. However much the facts argued against the reptile's words, there were some odd points to consider about this entire undertaking.

Looking at it from a purely rational standpoint, now...

There was a last little sand dune. Kirk and Lara topped it. The fortress loomed over them, barely a hundred meters away. It was surrounded by a field of black gravel.

"That's it." He grinned at her. "End of one long hard journey I've no desire to repeat."

"Ah, but we still have to go back, James." She moved close and this time he didn't edge away. It was not because he was too tired to.

"I'll tell you something true," she began, staring into his eyes. "I find you one of the most attractive men I've ever met. If we were...," she hesitated, "*together*, the rest of this would be easier. And if anything happened, why," she shrugged, "we'd have some green memories."

"I already have a lot of green memories," he told her gently. "I sometimes think too many."

Lara didn't try to hide her disappointment. "Oh." He put a comforting hand on her shoulder and squeezed.

"Maybe some other time, Lara. If it means anything, I think it would be one of the greenest of the green." He pulled his hand away as she reached for it. "But not now - we still have work to do."

She brightened. "At least you're willing to argue the point."

"I'm always open to logical persuasion."

The enormous, nearly perfect cube of metallic black was even more impressive when one stood at its immediate base. Nowhere could Kirk detect a hint of a sealed joint, bolt, or

riveting of any sort. It was almost as if the monolith had been created in one piece, complete and perfect.

Nor was there any sign of an entrance. An awesome bit of engineering. It would have been dominating in a city. "Here, on the bare sandy plain ringed by its black gravel border, it was awesome.

When nothing appeared to blast them from the earth, Kirk waved twice - behind and above. Sord, Spock, Em-three-green and Tchar joined him and Lara at the base.

"Is this not the shape," Spock asked the Skorr, "of the more primitive temples of your people?"

"Yes," Tchar admitted in surprise. "I had not known your knowledge extended so far, Mr. Spock." He stared upward. "Though there has never been anything as grand and beautiful as this. It is the work of some familiar with the Skorr, yet with an ability and single-mindedness of purpose my people have never known." He pointed to the right.

"If it is true to the old schematics, the entrance should be there." He flew toward the corner and they followed.

The carved door was cut just inside the corner, as Tchar had indicated. The complex motif engraved in the door itself probably meant something to the bird-man, but he didn't find it worthy of explanation and no one inquired.

"Truly, it is the same as the old temples," Tchar announced. "But the inscription is different. I cannot make it out, wholly. Much of it appears to consist of a warning, which is to be expected."

"Can you open it?" Kirk asked.

"No." Tchar looked distraught. "It is a familiar door - but it has no lock."

Kirk's gaze, followed soon by everyone else's, turned to rest on the shivering form of Em-three-green. He looked better now, though. Obviously the rest and shelter he had enjoyed

while riding Sord had done him much good. Not that he felt any different about this craziness. He still wanted out at the first opportunity. But he was studying the door in spite of himself, professional curiosity being about the only thing capable of distracting him from his fright.

"There's a lock on my oculars," he declaimed firmly. "I recognize the type - rare, subtle and expensive."

Kirk stared hard at the door, tried to spot the mechanism Em-three-green was talking about and saw nothing but designs and inscriptions in an alien hand.

"I'll take your word for it - I have to," he admitted. "Can you open it?"

"There's no lock, seal, jam, portal, crawlway or door in the Galaxy I can't open," the picklock announced.

As Em-three-green unslung the small pack from his back, Kirk studied the overhanging brow of the doorway and wondered at the motivation behind it. There was a brooding, fanatical malevolence behind all this. A cunning madness that sought only the deaths of millions of innocent beings.

The key question now was - how much confidence did these extremists place in their hiding place? Was it sufficient in their eyes, or were there less passive forms of argument awaiting their entrance?

The pack produced a belt of flexible dark plastic equipped with a multitude of tiny compartments. Em-three-green laid it neatly on the ground, revealing a tool kit of gleaming, exquisitely handicrafted devices that would not have been out of place in a surgery.

The picklock's gaze studied a series of depressions which formed a regular, roughly diamond-shaped pattern in the approximate center of the door. Kirk wouldn't have recognized them in a million years as being apart from their neighboring carvings or as constituting a lock. Em-three-green selected a number of the tools with an assurance which Kirk found remarkably comforting. Having thus armed himself, he walked

to the door and began work, his body shielding most of his actions from sight.

Kirk only hoped the alien's skill matched his confidence.

Something moved above them. He glanced upward sharply, saw nothing. *Easy, James, watch out or the boojums'll get you.* He returned his attention to Em-three-green.

Abruptly, an anticlimactic click sounded from somewhere inside the door. This initiated a steady hum.

Em-three-green's reaction was anything but relieved. Instead, his cilia moved more rapidly than ever. He seemed to be working twice as hard, and he looked frightened - which might not mean anything at all, since that was his normal mental state. But still -

"Anything the matter? Can't you do it?"

"I'm doing it, I'm doing it," the picklock muttered tightly, nervously.

"That's wonderful," Lara complimented him.

"No, you don't understand," he told her. "This lock is keyed with a timed series of irregular pulsations. If I don't cut the combination - eliminate the pulses in the proper sequence and within a certain time - it explodes."

Lara looked uncertain. "Does it matter whether we force the door neatly or otherwise?" She took a couple of wary steps backward, spoke to Kirk. "Why not let it blow itself open?"

Em-three-green supplied the answer - which pleased Kirk, because he didn't have one. "Such an explosion is designed to melt the metal of the door and any tunnel beyond, sealing it against unauthorized visitors - sometimes permanently."

"Spock, what's your opinion?" Kirk asked. Spock ignored him. The captain noticed his first officer was staring upward. "Spock?"

The science officer's warning shout sounded even as Kirk was turning his gaze toward the top of the cube.

Wings in wind -

Kirk ate sand as one of the cube sentinels swooped down at him, wicked hooked talons barely scraping his back. In unnatural silence the flying gargoyle banked and started in for another pass. There were two of the monsters - huge, threatening, not particularly swift, but immensely powerful-looking.

Kirk rolled to get his back against the cube, reaching for his phaser. Out of the corner of an eye he saw that Lara had her chemical gun out. She crouched just inside the entranceway. Em-three-green couldn't be seen, but his terrified moans could be heard from behind Sord. The big reptile had moved to block the entrance.

"Keep working," he rumbled over his shoulder. "I'll cover you."

Em-three-green was too busy working at the lock to offer a reply. In any case, he was in no position to argue with Sord, The big carnivore might possibly survive the threatened explosion, but Em-three-green would be reduced to scattered hunks of fur.

A shrill keening sounded directly above. Tchar charged into the two sentinels, breaking their formation and disrupting their attack. If one of the dark guardians got its claws on him, Kirk thought, the dogfight would be over instantly. But Tchar was clearly much faster. And he seemed to have the uncanny ability to dodge at the last second, before wing or claw could strike. It was almost as if he knew what his attacker was going to do before he did it.

The Skorr occupied the full attention of one of the sentinels, The other, the one that had just missed Kirk, was coming on again. Kirk fired. A second beam passed over his left shoulder - Spock was firing simultaneously.

Both beams made contact - and reflected off the polished throat of the gargoyle. It neither slowed nor swerved. A rapid

series of explosions sounded from near the door. Lara was firing her out-dated but lethal-looking pistol.

Maybe the explosive pellets did more damage than the phasers, or perhaps the monster was distracted by the noise. Whatever the reason, it shifted course in mid-dive and angled for the exposed huntress.

Kirk bit his lip, forced himself to keep a steady stream of energy trained on the sentinel, which was taking both phaser beams broadside, now. Lara dropped to one knee, tried to hit its underside.

They couldn't tell whether it was the concentrated phaser fire, the explosive shells, or both, but suddenly the creature came apart in mid-flight. The explosion wasn't particularly impressive - but the amount of debris and the size of the area it was strewn over was. Also the composition of that debris.

Kirk kicked at a fragment of it, heard the slight ring as it went tumbling across the gravel.

"Mechanicals," Spock observed interestedly. "Sord felt he might have seen something watching us, back along our path. And you too, Captain." He looked satisfied. "The Vedala were right. There are no living creatures here - only mechanized protectors."

A cry from above reminded them the battle wasn't over. Tchar had gotten a grip on the back of the remaining sentinel. Unable to strike a significant blow at the irritation on its back, the mechanical wheeled and fluttered in frustration. But neither could Tchar effectively incapacitate the armored flier.

It shook free. Then, as though directed by outside authority, it suddenly changed its mind. Folding its wings, it dove toward the door. Sord tried to edge even tighter into the slight indentation of the doorway.

"Hurry, small one," he rumbled. Again Em-three-green had no time to answer.

Kirk and Spock shifted their phasers to cover the second mechanical - then hesitated as Tchar charged straight down in pursuit.

"Don't fire!" the Skorr screamed.

Moving incredibly fast, Tchar slammed across the skull of the monster. A low grinding noise came from it. Either the distraction was effective, or else the creature had decided it wasn't going to be able to get past Sord. It spread ponderous wings and soared skyward again.

Tchar closed with it once more near the top rim of the cube. They locked together and vanished over the edge. Eyes human and otherwise locked there for long moments.

Distantly, the cough of an explosion. They waited a long time. Tchar did not reappear.

"No way to tell what happened up there," Kirk murmured. "Can't even be sure the mechanical blew up." He ran a hand over the slick-smooth wall. "Tchar may be up there, wounded, unable to fly. We can't reach the roof from the outside - maybe there's a way up from the interior. We can damn well look for -"

A soprano cry of exhaustion and triumph came from his right. It was followed by a jerky, piping laugh. Sord backed away.

A deep protest of stone against metal sounded briefly, and then the door began to twist open, moving smoothly on unseen gears. They crowded around the entrance.

A driving, icy rain began to fall from a sky that had been clear and warm minutes before. Even so, the tunnel revealed was anything but inviting, dark as the pit and just as empty.

Kirk looked around at the rest of them, hunching his shoulders against the pelting rain. "We could rest here awhile."

"No," objected Lara firmly. "We've come this far without stopping. If I sit down and rest I don't think I'll feel much like getting up again."

"Let's finish it," Sord snorted, "or give this deadfall a chance to finish us." He grinned, displaying a wicked set of customized cutlery.

"I too, would prefer to press on, Captain," admitted Spock. "There may be other mechanicals on guard. We still have the advantage of some surprise, I think. The faster we move the more off-balance any enemy will be. He will be forced to improvise instead of prepare."

"All right, that's what I want, too. But this is nominally a democratic expedition," Kirk told them, matching Sord's grin in spirit if not in flash. Turning, he led the way into the cube.

Spock and Kirk both had belt lights, which they used to advantage. No automatic lights brightened their way, but neither were they challenged by cousins of the metal gargoyles.

After a short jog, they reached a spot where the tunnel opened into a vast open space. Spock turned his light on each of them in turn as Kirk took a brief roll call. No one had disappeared through a hidden door.

Man and Vulcan increased the intensity of their beams, playing them around the interior. They stood in one immense open space which the two lights could barely illuminate. The walls were a mirror of the outside. They had a slick look, possibly due to internal condensation, and were devoid of markings or features of any kind.

Which starkness made the discovery of the soul all the more dramatic.

Spock's beam flashed on something overhead. The science officer searched carefully with the light - and then he had it. A scintillating lacework of three golden mobius strips floating in free air. It was beautiful - but to the little knot of beings below, hardly awesome enough to inspire fanatical devotion in an entire race. The knowledge of that power, however, outshone any physical trappings and gave it impressiveness to spare.

"Pretty bauble," Sord ventured, breaking the silence, "but how do we reach it?"

By way of reply, Spock turned his light on the wall behind them, played the beam up, down and sideways on it. He ran his palm over the metal.

"Unusual alloy - it would take a warfleet to penetrate this. Using the door was preferable - the Vedalan way. There is not the slightest indentation, nothing that would permit climbing. A remarkable piece of engineering, executed with devotion and care."

"I'm sure the builders would be flattered," Kirk snapped drily. "How do we get up? The walls aren't climbable without special equipment, which we don't have." He ran a bootheel along the floor. The soft squeaking sound echoed dimly in the vastness.

"Either we find a way to reach it," and he nodded in the direction of the soul, agonizingly near yet infinitely out of touch, "or we've come all this way for nothing."

A vaguely familiar rumble then - the sound of the door twisting back into place. It closed with a dull boom.

At which a pale white light began to fill the chamber.

Em-three-green was the first one to the closed door. He had to hunt to find the barely perceptible hairline crack it formed with the wall.

"No lock on the inside," he observed professionally. "No evidence of pressure easement." He looked at them helplessly. "I can't open solid metal. We're prisoners."

"So we are," Kirk agreed. Spock turned to stare at the captain in confusion. His response wasn't quite what he expected.

"You don't seem very surprised, Captain." Kirk was walking back toward the now well-lit chamber, examining the walls thoughtfully.

"Three previous expeditions tried to recover the soul and were lost. Admittedly, this world is unrelentingly hostile - but any forewarned team prepared as we were should have been able to survive as we have." He surveyed the room.

"I see no bones or anything else. No sign of the previous expeditions. Their remains should be here if they got this far. That not one of them did so I find too hard to believe."

"You are suggesting, then, Captain...?"

"I'm suggesting nothing, Spock - yet. Only that we've been luckier than we think, so far." He turned from Spock's inquiring stare to look back up at the soul.

"Still, we've no evidence anyone else did make it this far." He lowered his gaze and pointed. "Look there, on the far wall."

The ledge was barely a meter and a half wide and the same color and composition as the walls. It curled gently around the interior of the building, circling upward. It wasn't surprising the ledge had escaped Spock's probing beam. Without the interior illumination that had come on at the door's closing, they might never have spotted it.

They approached the ledge. It started two meters up. Kirk took a short run, leaped, grabbed the edge and started to muscle himself onto it.

A second later he fairly exploded upward. Getting his balance, he looked backward as Sord let out one of his now familiar rumbling laughs. Their reptilian strongman handed Spock up, then Lara and, despite frantic protests, Em-three-green.

"I'm terribly afraid of heights," the picklock sniffled, hugging the wall and shaking.

"You are terribly afraid of everything, Em-three-green," Spock commented. "There is no need to constantly apologize for your natural condition."

"I'm not apologizing!" Em-three-green shot back defiantly; then he sank in on himself in embarrassment "Please forgive

me for yelling, but..."

"Later," Kirk instructed him. He stared across at their massive companion, but Sord stepped back, shaking his shovel-like head.

"No, I'm not built for that sort of thing." Kirk kicked at the metal ledge with one boot.

"It'll hold you, Sord. It's an extrusion of the wall itself."

But Sord replied reluctantly, "*Maybe* it'll hold me. No, you'd better go on without me. I'd crowd you and I'd look funny walking on tiptoes. I'll wait for you down here."

They climbed slowly and patiently. The ledge wasn't dangerously narrow, but neither was it the broad boulevard Kirk wished for, and there was no railing.

It was remarkable, he reflected, how one could float in a suit, free and weightless, outside the *Enterprise* and feel perfectly calm and relaxed, and still grow nauseated and dizzy on a climb like this.

He stared up and out at the object of their search. The ledge reached out a thin tentacle of itself, but stopped short of the soul. What they would do when they reached that point he didn't know.

He felt himself shaking - and the cause was external.

"Hug the ledge!" Spock yelled. The four of them dropped flat, trying to dig nails and toes into the unyielding metal. The quake stopped, then came on again stronger. But there was more bluster than threat in the tremor. There was no sign of the walls coming down or of the ledge collapsing beneath them.

"We already know this world is geologically perverse," Spock commented, rising to his feet "It would be illogical for this edifice to be built without keeping that information in mind. Most likely it is mounted on flexible supports which absorb most of the violence of the quakes."

"That's what I need right now," muttered Em-three-green.

Kirk was tempted to add that the picklock shook even when the earth didn't. He quickly quashed the thought, which was undiplomatic and unworthy of a leader.

It was just that, as they drew nearer and nearer their objective, his built-in warning system was winding tighter and tighter. They couldn't simply reach out and pluck it - they couldn't! Someone had gone to an incredible amount of trouble to build this supersafe on this unholy world. To believe they could get this close without additional opposition was naive in the extreme.

The ledge turned a sharp corner and narrowed considerably. Sord could never have negotiated it. They had to turn sideways, backs against the wall, and edge across carefully. Then it was up, up, mounting ever higher - until they reached a point where the ledge broadened to a stop, from which a long, narrow arch extended out toward the floating soul.

They needed a respectable hunk of nerve to walk out onto that thin projection, and even more to look down the dizzying drop to the floor below. Em-three-green huddled close to Lara and concentrated his full attention on remaining in the precise center of the platform.

The metallic protrusion ended a couple of meters from the soul. "Close," Em-three-green groaned, "so close!"

Lara was unwinding a length of cord from her belt. "Maybe I can get a line on it."

Spock restrained her.

"We have no idea what kind of force field may surround it. Best to wait and save direct contact as a final option."

They hardly had time to discuss other possible means of retrieving the soul when a violent crump sounded behind them. Everyone ducked instinctively, but the blast was not repeated.

Kirk looked back the way they had come and saw that a wide section of ledge had vanished. Smoke still rose from the edges of seared metal. They were marooned on the platform.

That it had taken this long for their tormentor to show himself was all that surprised Kirk. But the motives of the mad are obscure and difficult to analyze. Kirk stared up into the far reaches of the fortress. They were two-thirds of the way up - from where he saw that near the roof the walls were not entirely unmarred. Instead, they were pocked with carved images, crevices, small craters and tiny dark tunnels.

"I told you there had to be something watching, protecting here besides just a locked door. There had to be something besides reliance on freakish weather and the occasional earthquake. There had to be something besides this superegomaniacal metal box. Something more subtle, something even the Vedala couldn't defend against."

"Which would be what, Captain?" Spock inquired.

Kirk's reply was tinged with sarcasm.

"A worm in the apple, Mr. Spock. A monkeywrench in the works, an activated positron in the dilithium, a rottenness in Denmark." He shook a challenging fist at the vast expanse of the roof.

"I know who you are!" he shouted, his eyes searching, hunting. Who could have placed the soul in a restraining field here, three hundred meters up in open air? Who would think to build this travesty of a holy temple as a monument to annihilation? Who, but the Skorr themselves?

"Show yourself, Tchar! The masquerade is over - take your bow."

Nothing happened for several seconds. Then the prince of the Skorr dropped from an as yet undetected hiding place. He dove toward them and spread batlike wings at the last moment, braking to hover on the other side of the soul. Laughing, whistling, jabbing accusing fingers at them - mocking civilization, and worse.

"Tchar," Lara muttered wonderingly, "in the name of the seven gods of the hunt, why did you do this? You and your little clique of militarists?"

Kirk shook his head sadly, tiredly. "It seems history is doomed to repeat itself even across racial and spatial borders. It's not a little fascinating, and not a little sad. You and your accomplices would start a meaningless crusade of blood across the Galaxy, initiate the murder of your people and other innocents - for what, for what? Tell us why, Tchar."

"The Skorr were a warrior race!" Tchar shrilled, whirling about in anger. "Slaves to the illusion of peace are we now - cowards, grown soft through the comforts of trade and weak by mental miscegenation." He gestured at the soul.

"This sick dream," he spat, "stole our souls, it did not heal them!" Now a hint of the fanatic's pride crept into his voice. "But there were a few of us high ones, a very few, who were wise enough to perceive this gigantic illusion which had sapped our racial determination and courage.

"We planned the theft, and none stopped us. None will stop us! There will be no time for another expedition before fury returns my people to glorious tradition. I, myself, came along to insure this. I alone saw the need, when I was told who would participate. And I was right - I was needed.

"I, Tchar, hereditary prince, waster of mine enemies, drinker of blood - I will lead my people into glory and revenge!"

"At best you can win only a Pyrrhic victory," Spock replied calmly, not in the least impressed by the *sturm-und-drang* speech of Tchar. "Most, if not all of your warriors will eventually be tracked down and killed. The Skorr homeworlds will be scoured clean of life when the warrior races of the Federation rise to do battle with you - as will the empires of the Klingons, and Romulans, and all the others."

"Perhaps," Tchar admitted, in defiance of Spock's logic. "A noble death risked to win a great dream." He shook angry talons at them,

"But no longer will we live like worms, crawling in the dirt. We will rise and conquer. You will be the fourth group sacrificed to the cause. But you have my respect - only you came this far. Only you necessitated my personal intervention. You will die in grace, as befits the enemies of a hereditary prince."

"Tchar, wait!" Lara called, too late. The Skorr had already wheeled up to disappear back into the dark places of the ceiling.

Far, far below a massive figure watched and tried to understand. Sord could tell something had gone wrong, but the sound from above dissipated in the vast expanse of the chamber. He had seen the ledge cut, of course, but there was nothing to be seen from below that could tie Tchar to the sabotage. Massive thoughts were considered and discarded as he tried to make sense of what had happened.

Lara had walked to the very edge of the precipice and stared calmly over. "Absolutely unclimbable, as Mr. Spock said." She shook her head disparagingly. "We'd bounce awful high."

As if to confirm her words, she suddenly drifted upward, followed by the others. Em-three-green spun frantically, clawing for a foothold.

"I believe this renders the problem academic," Spock declared.

"Gravity neutralizer - the building's equipped with null gravity," Kirk explained tightly.

"It may be part of the edifice's own components," Spock added, spreading arms and legs and trying to keep relatively motionless. "It would surely explain how this structure has been able to survive the multitude of tremors and other natural disasters that must have struck this spot."

Kirk found himself spinning despite his best efforts. Below, Sord found himself drifting, too, but had reacted more rapidly than any of them. He'd kicked out at the last instant, struck the floor a titanic blow, and sent himself sailing upward. His aim had been excellent. Reaching out, he had gotten a solid

grip on the projecting ledge, pulled himself atop it, and was now the only one not floating free.

Somewhere nearby, Tchar was whistling amusedly at them. Kirk struggled to orient himself, finally located the teasing, darting birdman.

"Now you can fly and fight as a Skorr - a worthy way to die, is it not?"

Kirk started to reply, but was interrupted by Sord. "No offense, little one, but let me have him." He slapped his chest with one paw, a blow that would have buckled the wall of a starship. But there was more to this situation than bulk and strength. Tchar would cut the clumsy Sord to pieces before the reptile could get a grip on him.

"No, Sord, not in free fall."

"Use your phaser on him, quickly!" Em-three-green suggested nervously.

"Yes, Captain Kirk," the voice of Tchar mocked, "use your phaser on me."

An invitation to destruction, Kirk knew. Tchar wanted them to fight him as a Skorr, so he could reassert his madman's version of Skorrian bushido. That meant hand-to-hand combat. No modern accouterments like hand phasers.

If this structure was equipped with electronics as sophisticated as a gravity neutralizer, he had no doubt there was something trained on them this very minute capable of canceling out their phasers - perhaps even keying on their energy cells. To fire one might cause it to blow up in one's face.

"It must be on his terms," he told Em-three-green.

They might work this to their advantage. If they expressed a reluctance to fight, Tchar could probably dispose of them from a convenient distance. Instead he chose personal combat. His controlling phobia demanded he kill them personally.

"Spock, how long since you've done zero-gee combat exercises?"

"I subscribe to the prescribed dosage, Captain."

That told him Spock was up on technique, without telling Tchar any more than was necessary. Let him interpret that as he might.

"Well," he shouted to Tchar, steeling himself, "what are you waiting for?"

Tchar was hard put to restrain his laughter. "You are turning slow circles, Captain Kirk, with no sign of stopping. A most disadvantageous tactical position."

Tchar was right. Before they could do any maneuvering of any kind they needed a firmer purchase than thin air. Tchar didn't want the kill to be too easy, then. Worse for him.

"Lara, throw your line to Sord." The huntress nodded. Uncoiling the line and wrapping one end around her right wrist, she tossed the gently weighted other end towards the braced and ready Sord.

The action sent her spinning, but Sord caught the loop easily and pulled her in. While he braced her she reeled in Em-three-green, Kirk, and Spock.

"Very good, Captain, very good!" Tchar applauded mockingly. Kirk thought he detected the gleam of insanity in the Skorr's eyes even at this distance. He was working himself up good and proper.

So much the better. "If we can get him to lose control of himself, Spock, get him to stop thinking..."

"An admirable objective, Captain," Spock whispered back. "Should I have a choice, however, I believe I would opt for a fast kick to the jugular."

Kirk smiled grimly.

"Let's go, then."

Bracing himself, Kirk drew an imaginary line and kicked free of the platform. Spock did likewise, kicking harder. Thus he reached the far wall first and pushed off again to approach Tchar from the other side.

Tchar whistled, charged straight at Kirk. Obviously he intended to deal with them one at a time. He had plenty of time to bleed Kirk, turn, and deal with Spock.

Kirk had aimed for the soul. It was the only cover of any kind available in the dangerously open space. The maneuver generated only contempt in Skorr's eyes. He'd expected better than a desperate dash for the soul.

Talons extended, he headed for Kirk's face. The human's soft hands worried him not at all. Kirk first, then the Vulcan, then the others at his leisure. The large stupid reptile would take many cuts to die. Em-three-green he would save for last. It would be interesting to see if he could frighten him to death.

But first - the human.

Wings beating to his sides, forelimbs extended - then Kirk moved. Tchar momentarily lost his poise and tried to change his angle of approach.

At the last possible second, Kirk had curled into a tight spinning ball. When he came out of it it was with both legs tucked tight into his chest. He extended them just in time to meet Tchar's midsection.

One claw struck home - only to glance harmlessly off the thick sole of Kirk's boot. But the unblocked leg drove deeply into the Skorr's stomach.

As he tumbled awkwardly from the blow, screaming in pain and rage, the hereditary prince of the Skorr was met from behind by the late arriving Spock. Too late, Tchar sensed he had been duped, that the timing of the two bipeds had been planned to bring about just this situation.

He'd committed a terrible error - underestimating his opponents. Now the Vulcan had a grip on both arms and despite his best efforts, Tchar couldn't dislodge him from his back.

Kirk had continued on to the soul, met the expected force-field and used it to kick back toward Tchar. But this time Tchar was ready for the tumble-and-kick and he twisted away, slashing out with a clawed leg.

Kirk wrenched aside and the claw ripped down his front, drawing a little blood. Straining, the Skorr managed to fight his way over to the force field. A couple of rough jolts against it were enough to knock Spock loose. Furious, Tchar turned to rend the Vulcan.

But Spock was far from incapacitated. Although he had been shaken off, he had managed to get a grip on the outline of the force field. Now he used it as a barrier between himself and Tchar.

By then Kirk had struck the far wall, kicked off, and was coming back for more. Tchar spotted him at the last instant, but by now he had had about enough: this exercise had been interesting and instructive, but it had taken rather too much time. Instead of turning to meet Kirk's charge he strove for altitude.

"Very good," he called down to the two men bobbing near the soul. "Surprisingly good. But it was you, Captain Kirk, who called for an end to masquerades. Now this too, must end.

Folding his wings, he dropped like a stone toward Kirk. Sord, Em-three-green and Lara watched, worried. Kirk was drifting free. Even if he reached the force-field around the soul, Tchar's power dive would drive curved talons right through him.

Kirk reached the soul, got a grip on its edge. Tchar screamed in triumph - just as Kirk turned. Both sets of claws slammed into Kirk's backpack - and stuck.

The force of the blow had almost knocked Kirk off the field - almost. Then, as Tchar screamed in frustration, Spock crawled carefully round and got a grip on the Skorr's wings.

They made contact with the soul and contact with the thief. Now was the time.

"Lara, call for retrieval!"

"No!" Tchar shrieked desperately. Kirk had succeeded in his aim, making the Skorr forget everything but the fury of battle. They had to have him pinned before they issued that irreversible call. Had to, because there was a button on Tchar's belt, a button he now fought vainly to reach, a button which undoubtedly controlled the gravity neutralizer and in an emergency could have sent them all tumbling to the metal floor where, as Lara had predicted, they would have bouncd very high indeed.

But Lara could now throw the switch on her pack without fear of that.

A faint smell of ozone was in evidence as the air around them crackled. They had only one remaining fear - could the Vedala retrieval field penetrate the force-field holding the soul of Alar? Or would it retrieve only them?

Or would the force-field interfere with the retrieval field and leave them all drifting in limbo?

He speculated on it as his vision began to fade, as Tchar's wrenching cry of, "Let me die!" echoed in his ears.

No Tchar, Tchar of the soaring wings and mad dream, you're coming back with us - though I truly wish that I could grant your wish...

***

Running water played counterpoint to the wind in the grass. Kirk felt a warm breeze on his face and smelled the smell of green things growing. He looked down at himself.

There were no scratches on his arm, no gash in his chest where Tchar's claws had struck. They were standing in a familiar glade, back on the Vedala asteroid.

Baring unabashed stares of astonishment, they stood as they had stood days ago - rested, clean, refreshed - before the expedition had begun. Had he dreamed it all - had the quest only taken place in their minds? Or, he thought as he turned to face the small, confident figure standing in the glade's center, had it all been simply an elaborate display of some strangely Vedalan sense of humor?

"We give you thanks," the Vedala intoned solemnly. He moved aside to reveal a triplet of mobius strips, glowing golden against the greensward. "The soul of Alar is returned to his people. There will be no jihad."

He gestured and the soul vanished. Presumably it was already well on its way to the central Skorr homeworld - along with a recommended list of precautions to prevent any future theft.

"What about Tchar?" Kirk asked. "How are you going to deal with him?"

Another gesture and they saw Tchar, arms and wings bound, sneering at unseen tormentors.

"The hereditary prince is proud and brave and has many useful qualities. We will make a small adjustment in his personality. You would argue the morality of this, Captain Kirk, as is the peculiarity of your race - but you will not argue its efficacy. He will be made sane again." The picture of the bound Tchar faded.

"We cannot reward you with other than our thanks and the knowledge of what you have prevented. Nor can the Skorr, for this must remain hidden from them. Tchar's co-perpetrators will be found out and dealt with, without subjecting their people to racial shock. The Skorr must never suspect that this monstrousness was engineered by some of their own, or they would engage in a vicious, useless witch-hunt for more blasphemers."

"Oh well," Sord rumbled airily, "got nowhere to wear a medal anyway."

"There will be questions," Spock remarked.

The Vedala smiled softly at the Vulcan. "You will see, there will be no questions. Goodbye..." The Vedala began to dissolve.

Lara moved over to stand next to Kirk. "Goodbye, James. It's too bad - we almost could have..."

Her voice faded and became inaudible as Kirk's vision began to blur once more.

***

Scott and Sulu were in the transporter room when Spock and Kirk rematerialized. And although Kirk was glad to see them, he noticed something about their expressions.

"Captain, Mr. Spock," Sulu began anxiously, "what went wrong?"

Kirk took a moment to look down at himself, saw nothing wrong, glanced over at Spock. Everything seemed perfectly normal here - except Sulu and Scott's attitude.

"What do you mean, Mr. Sulu?"

"You went over and came right back," Scott explained. "Did the Vedala call this off, give you orders, or what?"

"Now wait a minute, what -"

Spock made a gesture indicating silence.

"How long have we been gone, Mr. Sulu?" Spock inquired.

Sulu shrugged. "About two minutes, maybe three, I guess. Just enough time for me to get down here after you beamed dirtwards."

A great deal passed between Kirk and Spock in a single look.

"The Vedala changed their minds," the captain said briskly, stepping off the transporter platform. "They needed some fast advice and we answered their one question. Back to your stations, now. This was just a momentary detour, a sidestop. Mr. Spock..."

"Yes, Captain?"

"I'm going to my cabin to make the official log entry. I'll see you on the Bridge."

"Very good, Captain." Spock started for the elevator.

"Oh, and Spock..."

"Sir?" Spock turned and waited.

"When you get there, instruct Uhura to contact the nearest Starfleet base for orders. Maybe this time they can find something a little more interesting for us to do."

"*Interesting*, Captain?" Spock threw back his head in surprise as Kirk walked up beside him. "It *is* interesting ... to learn that understatement is not the exclusive province of Vulcans."

The doors closed behind them.

Scott leaned against the transporter console while Sulu stared in confusion after the two departed commanding officers.

"Now what do you suppose all that was about?" the helmsman wondered out loud. Scott smiled.

"It's verra simple, Mr. Sulu. Easy to understand when you've been around the captain and Mr. Spock as long as I have. See, they're both crazy. Only the captain tries to fool us into thinkin' it's a cover, and Mr. Spock is too polite to admit to it." Scott let out a long breath, moved away from the console.

"Well, you heard the orders. I suggest you get back to the Bridge. Me, I'm goin' back to Engineerin' and my engines. At least they're not loonie. It's easy to stay sane back there," he finished as he stepped into the elevator. "Because when

anythin' goes wrong with them, I can always call on the little people to come and fix 'em."

The lift doors closed.

Sulu stared at them for a long moment, then muttered something no one was there to hear. It didn't matter - mankind had heard it before, had known it to be true since the beginning of time.

"Everyone's crazy here but me and thee," he sang, "and sometimes I'm not so sure about thee."

Whistling cheerfully, he ambled toward the elevator and the bridge beyond.

THE PIRATES OF ORION

(Adapted from a script by Howard Weinstein)

I

"Captain's log, stardate 5527.3," Kirk declaimed into the armchair pickup as he surveyed the bridge. "My 'nothing at all' turned out to be the first symptoms of choriocytosis.

"Despite an initial outbreak during which several members of the crew apparently contracted the disease simultaneously, it appears to be under control now. Dr. McCoy insists it's no longer even as dangerous as pneumonia, and we have experienced no significant drop in performance. Therefore I foresee no difficulties in completing our newly assigned mission - representing the Federation at the dedication ceremonies for the new interspecies Academy of Science on Deneb Five." He clicked off the log, looked to his left.

"Status, Mr. Spock?"

"All systems operating at prime efficiency, Captain. We are on course and on schedule. I anticipate no deviations from the norm."

Kirk leaned back in the command chair and mused on the arduous duty they would be subjected to upon making landfall on Deneb Five. They would be forced to cope with an endless round of parties, gourmet dinners, the brilliant conversation of new acquaintances and the warm chatter of old ones. Yet, after what they had been through these past several months, he somehow believed they would succeed in muddling through.

"Be nice to play diplomat for a change, eh, Spock?"

Dead silence.

"Look, Spock," he continued, turning in the chair, "I know you find the hypocritical methodology of interstellar diplomacy somewhat obscene, but that shouldn't prevent you from enjoying the fringe bene-"

Without a word, without a sound, without a shift in expression or pose, Spock abruptly toppled over and crashed to the floor.

Kirk was quite capable of reacting quickly and efficiently to anything from the sudden appearance of half a dozen belligerent warships on the fore screen to impending dissolution of the *Enterprise*, from the sight of a being a hundred times larger than the ship to an entire metropolis no bigger than the bridge. But Spock's collapse was so totally unexpected, so deathly quiet and matter-of-fact, that for one of the few times during his tenure as commanding officer of the *Enterprise* he found himself momentarily paralyzed.

Even so, he recovered before any of the other equally stunned crew. A hand slammed down on the intercom switch.

"Kirk to Sick Bay - Bones, we've got an emergency."

While seemingly hours passed without aid appearing, they fought to control their feelings and do what they could. There wasn't much they could do, beyond untangling the first officer's crumpled limbs and laying him flat on the deck - and wondering what the heck had happened. Kirk had put an ear to Spock's chest and found temporary relief in the steady beat of a Vulcan heart. But no amount of exterior stimulation - or pleading - could return Spock to consciousness.

McCoy finally appeared, a mobile surgical bed and two medical techs in tow. Kneeling over the still form, he made a quick pass over head and torso with a portable medical transceiver, then directed the pair of assistants as they laid the motionless Spock on the bed.

Kirk followed them out, knowing better than to trouble McCoy with dozens of as yet unanswerable questions. As soon as answers were available, the good doctor would supply them without having to be asked.

On reaching Sick Bay, McCoy had Spock transferred from the mobile pallet to one of the much better equipped diagnostic beds. While the doctor smoothly adjusted the requisite instrumentation for Vulcan physiology, Kirk hovered nearby, watching, waiting for a determination of some sort. Kirk knew something about every instrument and machine on board the *Enterprise*, but many of the figures which blossomed on the glowing panel above the bed head meant little to him. Those whose meaning he could vaguely identify seemed to indicate the presence of an uncommon abnormality within the science officer's system.

McCoy prepared and administered a hastily concocted injection. Only when the applied serum took did he appear to relax slightly.

"I brought him out of shock, Jim," he finally said. "He's sleeping normally now. Choriocytosis is a strange disease. It's relatively simple to handle in races with iron-based blood, but in others..."

A warning tingle started in Kirk's mind.

"Get to the point, Bones."

McCoy appeared to consider something else for a moment, shook it off and eyed Kirk steadily. "Spock has contracted the disease. It's a nuisance to humans. To Vulcans it's fatal. Ninety-three percent probability, as -" his words slowed and finished almost imperceptibly "- Spock would say."

Kirk cleared his throat. "You're sure it's choriocytosis?"

"I've triple-checked, Jim, given the instrumentation every opportunity to prove me wrong." He shrugged helplessly. "I wish to God I was wrong, but you can see it eating at him. Look..."

He urged Kirk to activate a nearby view screen. While the captain did so, McCoy went to a cabinet. Selecting a tiny cassette, he slid it into a slot beneath the glowing screen, punched out commands on the operating panel.

A few seconds of blurred images raced across the screen as the cassette ran up to the place McCoy had requested. It slowed and commenced normal playback. You didn't need a medical degree to understand what was happening. One sequence stayed with Kirk long after he had left Sick Bay.

It showed a collage of healthy, green-tinted Vulcan cells. From screen right, a flowing yellowish substance slid like sapient gelatin into view. It divided, subdivided, to surround each individual cell. On being engulfed, the afflicted cells started to jerk unnaturally, their steady movements interrupted. Healthy green deepened to light blue, then azure, almost to purple before all internal motion ceased and cellular disruption took place.

On that threatening note, the tape ran out.

McCoy slid the casette free, juggled it idly in one hand, flipping it over and over as he spoke.

"The sequences you saw, Jim, were highly speeded up. Simply, the infection enters the blood and affects the cells so that they can't carry oxygen. For some reason, iron-based hemoglobin fights off the encirclement much better than copper-based. I wish I knew why. The result is obvious."

"Eventual collapse," Kirk supplied softly.

McCoy quit flipping the casette, put it back in its place in the cabinet then closed the sliding door with more force than was necessary.

"That's it, Jim."

"You said ninety-three percent probability of death, Bones. What about that other seven percent? Does that mean there's a cure?"

"Not always. But there's a drug that would certainly improve the odds in Spock's favor astronomically - if we could get it."

"Well get it," Kirk told him. His reply would have been the same if McCoy had requested the heart of a dead sun.

"It's a naturally occurring drag called strobolin. Sixty years in the lab and nobody's been able to synthesize it. It's a rare drug, Jim, but choriocytosis is a rare disease."

Kirk nodded, moved for the switch that would open the wall intercom and connect him to the bridge. Then something that had been scratching at the back of his mind finally broke through.

"Bones, if you knew we were experiencing an outbreak of choriocytosis on board and that it could be fatal to Spock if he contracted it - why didn't you order him into isolation until the disease burned itself out?"

McCoy looked away. "I didn't want to have to tell you, Jim."

"Didn't want to have to tell me what, Bones?" Kirk shot back, a little angry. "What could anything have to do with not telling me?"

"I said choriocytosis was a rare disease. My guess is your system was laid open to it -" he looked back, "- by the multiple alterations your circulatory system was subjected to while on Argo. In which case -"

"You didn't want to tell me that Spock and I had infected the whole ship." McCoy nodded, watched the captain anxiously. But Kirk appeared to bear up well under a revelation that might have affected a lesser man dangerously.

"Then, why did I and plenty of others get sick, go through the disease and get cured, and then all of a sudden Spock collapses?"

McCoy looked tired. "Incubation period, Jim. It's a lot longer for Vulcans than for humans. There was no point in telling Spock, nothing to be gained. If he had it, there wasn't a thing I could do about it."

"Why is the incubation period so much?" Kirk began, but McCoy cut him off angrily, his voice rising.

"Why, why, why, why! If I knew the answers to all the whys, choriocytosis wouldn't be such a putrid, disgusting -"

"Sorry, Bones," Kirk interrupted softly. There wasn't much else he could say. McCoy'd only been expressing the same frustration he felt.

Instead he activated the nearby computer annex. "Library!"

"Awaiting input," came the instant, mechanical reply.

"What is the nearest strobolin supply world to our present position?"

"Canopus Two," the library responded promptly. "Four days distant at maximum warp."

Kirk flipped off the annex and headed for the door, then stopped in mid-stride and returned, to stare down at the corpselike - no, not corpselike, he hurriedly corrected himself - the sleeping form of Spock.

"How long can he last without the drug?"

McCoy considered carefully, his momentary outburst already forgotten by both men. "I said strobolin couldn't be duplicated in the lab. That's so - but there is an artificially produced related serum I ought to be able to make up.

"All it can do is slow the disease, not stop it The destructive agent rapidly builds an immunity to the serum. Despite all forestalling efforts, at the rate his blood is losing the ability to carry oxygen, I give him three days at best, Jim. Four days to reach the drug - and Spock will die in three in spite of everything I can do. That's," an odd expression came over him, "logical. Unless -"

"Unless what, Bones?"

McCoy looked guarded. "What about a rendezvous?"

"Of course! If we can't reach the drug in time, there's a chance that another Federation ship might be close to

Canopus Two right now. There's got to be!" He was back at the intercom in seconds.

"Kirk to Bridge - get me Starfleet operations control for this sector, Lieutenant."

"Transmitting, Captain."

The logistics seemed beyond immediate solution. However, it was startling how much bureaucracy and red tape one could cut through by bringing the proper amount of priority demands, prime requests and insinuations to bear - all seasoned with a touch of judicious threats.

It was eventually decided that the starship *Potemkin*, presently on patrol in the region of Canopus, would pick up the requisite amount of strobolin. This would then be transferred to the interstellar freighter *Huron* for delivery to the *Enterprise*.

Kirk would have preferred meeting the *Potemkin* himself and avoiding any intermediaries. But there were certain requests even he couldn't have filled - tying up two starships for speedy delivery of a drug was one of them.

Spock was a valued officer - but he was only one. Starfleet had a plethora of personnel and a distinct shortage of starships. Vessels the class of the *Enterprise* and *Potemkin* were too few and far between for their missions to be casually aborted - or so said the reply to his request.

Kirk didn't argue with the logic of the missive, but the word "casual" in reference to Spock filled him with a quiet hatred for some unknown officer whose career had been spent behind a desk pushing paper.

On the other hand, if all went well they would still receive the drug in plenty of time. And McCoy had assured him that strobolin's effectiveness matched its rarity.

McCoy leaned against the wall in Kirk's cabin and watched his superior officer and good friend going through mental nip-ups. With the exception of Spock, he was probably the only

one on board who knew that this was the first time Kirk had ever traded on his reputation to produce desired results.

Kirk hated officers who used "pull" to get what they wanted. So his embarrassment at doing so himself was understandable. McCoy repressed a smile. If the captain only knew the awe the rest of the crew held him in for being able to generate such action on the part of a notoriously somnolent bureaucracy.

Naturally no one showed the admiration they felt - everyone knew it would only embarrass him more.

As for himself, he mused exhaustedly, he had done everything it was humanly - or for that matter, Vulcanly - possible to do for the mortally ill first officer. Now he must devote his energies to ensuring that Kirk wouldn't fold up as the critical rendezvous approached. The last thing he wanted was *two* important patients.

***

"What are the symptoms like, Bones?" Kirk finally muttered idly, staring at the ceiling. The three-dimensional desert diorama projected above his bed offered little comfort.

McCoy shrugged, tried to make the terrifying sound casual. "Increasing difficulty in breathing, coupled with a corresponding drop in efficiency. All the signs of someone working under extreme altitude conditions. Kind of like the standard Academy mountain survival test. Remember that one?"

That memory produced a small grin ... very small. It vanished when the door buzzer sounded politely.

"Come."

The panel slid aside, and the subject of all the recent activity walked in. Spock showed no sign of the concern or trouble centering on him. His uniform and posture were immaculate, as usual. His expression was bland as vanilla, as usual. Only in his movements could one who knew him well detect

something amiss. Lift of hand, drive of leg, all were just a hair slow, the movements of a man recently arisen from a deep sleep.

Or slipping into one, Kirk thought morosely.

"You wish to see me, Captain?"

"Yes, Spock. Sit down."

With a quick glance at McCoy, who in trying to avoid it only made his concern more obvious, Spock took up a seat facing Kirk. The captain swung his legs off the bed, sat up.

"We've arranged a rendezvous to pick up the drug you need."

"I trust it will not affect our scheduled arrival at Deneb Five, nor our duties there?"

"No, it won't," Kirk said gently.

"What's the matter, Spock?" put in McCoy in a forced attempt at levity, "afraid you'll miss the first dance at the Federation Academy ball?"

"I'm afraid I do not dance, Doctor."

"You can say that again," McCoy countered, but he did it without a smile and the attempted joke fell flat.

An awkward pause ensued while Kirk considered how to proceed. With any other member of the crew he wouldn't have had to. But could he simply say what had to be said to Spock? The first officer perceived certain things differently than others. Would he be offended? Angry? More than anything else, Kirk wished now he knew more about Vulcan customs - and etiquette, in particular.

"Will that be all, Captain?" Spock asked, giving Kirk no more time to hope for divine intervention.

"One more thing, Spock," he began, without meeting his first officers gaze. "I've considered very carefully. Based on Dr.

McCoy's recommendations - (*that's it, make Bones the heavy, James T. Chicken*) - I've decided to cut your duty time in half."

A faint glimmer of something close to emotion seemed to shine behind dark pupils. "Captain, that won't be necessary. I am perfectly capable of..."

A hand came down on his shoulder and he glanced around and up. McCoy, firm, not joking now.

"No argument, Spock. Doctor's orders."

Kirk watched his first officer carefully. No reaction. Of course not - a sign of health in itself.

"That's all, Spock," he said curtly, before his friend could offer additional rejoinders. "Dismissed."

Spock nodded once, rose and walked slowly to the door. McCoy relaxed perceptibly as soon as the portal closed behind him.

"Whew. He took that better than I expected."

"He took it like Spock - no, that's not fair of me, Bones."

"Forget it, Jim. I know how you feel - it's hard, watching him like that and waiting for the collapse you know is coming. I just wish there was something more I could do for him."

"It'll hurt seeing him go steadily downhill."

McCoy looked philosophical. "The only other alternative is to confine him to quarters, or to Sick Bay. I don't see any point in that. It won't do anything for him from a physical standpoint and it could only hurt him mentally. So I see no harm in letting him -"

"Feel useful in his last hours?"

Both men stared quietly at each other, each lost in his own thoughts - the strongest presence in the room that of one who was no longer there.

***

Streamlining had given way to functionality in the latter part of the Twenty-First Century. So the ships which carried freight between the stars were equal parts ugly and efficient, ungainly and profitable.

The *S. S. Huron* was typical if this class and its crew typical of crews on such ships. There were some who insisted that the small living quarters on board such craft made for small men. In reality, the reverse was usually true. They were no less daring, no less brave than starship personnel - only sloppier and more independent.

Captain O'Shea of the *Huron* probably fell about midway between fiction and reality. Outwardly there was little to distinguish him. He was of average build and temperament, excepting the special sole of his left shoe, constructed to accommodate the fact that the one leg was a number of centimeters shorter than the other one. On such minutiae do careers in Starfleet hang.

Naturally, that detail made him stronger than those he was passed over in favor of. O'Shea needed that strength. The duller the task, the more inner strength a man needed to survive.

His face, at least, was noble, adequately laden with planes and angles inscribed by years of service. It might have been taken from the bust of a Roman patrician, despite the incongruity of the five-o'clock shadow.

At the moment he stood in the small, curved chamber which served as the bridge for the *Huron*. His two assistants were seated before him at the compact control console, staring at the fore viewscreen.

Quarters were snug. On board a freighter everything was sacrificed for the comfort of the cargo. O'Shea and his crew were classed with the other incidental equipment.

"Time to rendezvous...," Elijah paused briefly to check a readout, "...two hours seven minutes, Captain."

O'Shea grunted in acknowledgment. It was his favorite mode of expression, being at once eloquent and economical. He also had an excellent negative grunt O'Shea could produce a veritable spectrum, an *olla podrida* of grunts, constituting a language in themselves.

But the unusual importance of this run compared to their usual assignments compelled him to greater loquaciousness, his ambivalent feelings about the job notwithstanding.

"Must be a pretty important drug we're carrying for the *Enterprise*. I'd just as soon get rid of it and get back to shipping plain dilithium."

The *Huron*'s first officer, John Elijah, smiled to himself. Despite his constant complaining, he knew O'Shea was reveling in the attention they had received. The captain had been hard-pressed to keep the seams of his jacket intact when the priority call had come through from Starfleet, with its companion orders.

O'Shea already had had a chance to do a little strutting before the crew of the *Potemkin*. Now he was looking forward to playing hero before the officers of one of the most famous ships in the Federation, the *Enterprise*.

No wonder he was feeling talkative!

He felt a tap on his arm and looked across at his partner. Lieutenant Fushi eyed him questioningly, directed his attention to a certain readout on the other side of the console. Like nearly everything else, the by-play caught O'Shea's attention.

"What are you two on about?"

"Sir," Fushi confessed, openly puzzled, "our sensors are registering the presence of a ship ahead." Several intriguing new crevices appeared in the captain's mobile face.

"Odd. Could the *Enterprise* be this early? Sure, and this is listed as a priority meeting, but..."

"Still too far away to tell what it is, sir," Fushi replied.

"What's its approximate course?"

"Toward us, sir."

O'Shea grunted. Elijah and Fushi had no trouble translating it to, "Well, that's all very interesting information Lieutenant, and I certainly hope it is the *Enterprise*; but since we're not sure yet perhaps you'd best keep an eye on it."

In the hands of a master like the captain the content of a barely verbalized monosyllable could be truly startling.

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Kirk halted dictation into his private log and looked to the helm. "Time to rendezvous, Mr. Arex?"

The Edoan checked the chronometer readout, compared it with the declaration of another gauge. "One hour forty-three minutes, Captain."

Kirk considered this briefly before turning his attention to the Bridge engineering station, where Scott was keeping a close watch on numerous gauges.

"Scotty, I hate to ask this, but..."

Scott simply looked back and nodded. "Aye, Captain, we'll squeeze a bit more speed out of her somehow."

"If it'll help, Scotty, I'll get out and push."

"Any of us would, Captain. Let me see what I can do."

An insistent buzz pulled Kirk's attention back to the chair intercom.

"McCoy to bridge."

Kirk opened the channel. "What is it, Bones?"

"Tell Spock it's time for another shot."

Kirk lowered his voice as he looked over toward the science station. "Again, Bones?"

"Again, Jim."

Kirk sighed. "All right, I'll send him down." He raised his voice. "Mr. Spock." There was no response. "Mr. Spock!" Now Sulu had turned to stare, and Uhura had swiveled 'round at her station.

"He looks tired, Bones," Kirk said into the pickup. "Just a minute." He got out of the chair and walked toward his first officer. "Spock? Spock!"

The first officer's eyes, which had been closed as Kirk approached, opened slowly. He gazed blankly up at Kirk for a moment. Then both eyes and mind seemed to clear simultaneously.

"I was conserving energy, Captain."

Kirk nodded matter-of-factly, trying not to let his relief show. "McCoy wants you in Sick Bay. Time for another injection."

Spock rose from his seat - slowly, carefully, but without aid - and walked toward the elevator with the same measured movements.

The silence on the bridge was deafening.

***

O'Shea leaned between his two juniors and studied the abstract overlay on the viewscreen. So far it could show no more than a moving blip - enigmatic and uniformly uninformative.

Fushi had been staring into a gooseneck viewer for long moments. Now he sat back, flipped a single switch and rubbed his eyes. He had collated the mass approximations, extreme-range silhouette configuration estimates, energy registration and a dozen others. These enabled him to make a single terse announcement

"It's not the *Enterprise* closing on us, sir."

"Another Federation vessel?" There was more hope than confidence in O'Shea's voice now.

"No, sir. It's an outsider for sure. A design I don't recognize. That's not to say half the helmsmen in the Federation wouldn't recognize it, but I don't."

"That's good enough for me," O'Shea acknowledged grimly. "Are we close enough yet for visual pickup?"

"Three minutes on our current course should bring it within range of our fore telescanners, sir."

O'Shea considered. From the beginning he'd enjoyed this mission. It had provided a chance for some infrequent recognition as well as an opportunity to present himself as a person of importance. Everything had run smoothly.

Now there was a loose neutron in the reaction chamber, and he found he didn't like it one bit.

Fushi was doing his best with the *Huron*'s telescopic pickups. The abstract overlay vanished from the main screen, to be replaced by a wavering, fuzzy starfield. In its center was what appeared at first glance to be a red star.

Fushi made adjustments, and the star became a ship. O'Shea studied the unknown visitor intently. Its design was different, but not extreme - alien without being radical. It was colored blood red, a choice which might be coincidental, theatrical, or intentional.

One out o' three, he mused, ain't good.

"You sure it's coming toward us?" he asked again.

Eiljah was busy checking gauges. "Definitely on an intercept course, Captain. Estimates of speed ... it'll reach us before we make contact with the *Enterprise*."

"Maybe," said Fushi quietly, "they just want to chat."

"Maybe," agreed O'Shea, staring at the alien image as it grew nearer and nearer. "Maybe..."

***

"Maybe we can dispense with these injections soon, Spock," McCoy told him.

Spock was lying down on one of the diagnostic beds. Nurse Chapel stood nearby. McCoy wielded the air hypo like an artist with a brush, placed it against the first officer's shoulder.

"This won't hurt a bit now, Spock."

"An unnecessary reassurance, Doctor," his patient replied, "in addition to being untrue."

McCoy grimaced as he administered the serum. "That's the last time I waste my best bedside manner on a Vulcan."

Spock, rolling down the sleeve of his tunic, started to sit up. "Such restraint would be welcome, Doctor."

McCoy put a hand on the first officer's untreated shoulder and gently pressed him back. "Agreed, provided you show some of the same, Spock. Lie there quietly."

Nodding to Chapel, he directed his full attention to the screen over the head of the bed. Chapel adjusted the complex diagnostic mechanism. The result was a series of brightly lit printouts on the screen which the patient, in his reclining position, couldn't see.

Respiration, circulation - McCoy went through the succession of figures, compared them with those taken four hours earlier. There was nothing there he hadn't expected to see. That made them no less depressing.

Considering the massive doses Spock had been receiving, one would think those strobolin analogs would be more effective. To an observer basing his opinion on the present readings, all those injections would seem to have been worse than useless.

But McCoy knew that without those injections he would not be reading any results on Spock now. Corpses generate singularly uniform figures. He looked down at the subject of all this analysis, who waited patiently for permission to get back to his assigned tasks, and smiled in manner belying his true feelings.

"Well, that's not too bad ... not too bad at all. I'm afraid it's back to the salt mines for you, Spock."

Spock started to get up, nearly fell. McCoy managed to restrain himself to the barest twitch and kept himself from extending a supportive arm.

"Thank you, Doctor," Spock said evenly, getting to his feet slowly but steadily now. Like a man in a dream, he left the room.

Chapel's professional smile didn't fade until he was gone. "The drug isn't working any more, Doctor. If it was, he wouldn't have lost that much ground in four hours." McCoy turned from her, troubled.

"I know, Christine, I know. The additional injections can't hurt his system and psychologically they may help. Don't worry ... we'll have the strobolin soon."

That was what McCoy said. But a person did not have to be as familiar with him as Chapel was to read what he meant.

They'd *better* have the strobolin soon...

***

"They've increased speed, sir," Fushi reported tightly. "Closing fast on us now."

"Why do I have this nagging impression they want more from us than just talk?" O'Shea muttered. "Open hailing frequencies, Mr. Elijah. Standard intership call."

The first officer of the *Huron* reached for the required instruments, manipulated several. "Open, sir. They're plenty

close enough; should pick us up easy."

O'Shea moved forward, spoke toward the directional mike.

"To unidentified alien vessel. This is Captain Svenquist O'Shea of the Federation freighter *S.S. Huron* - on whose course you are currently closing. Please state your registry and intentions." He paused, repeated, "Please identify yourself."

"No use, sir," a vexed Elijah reported. "They've got to be receiving ... but they're not answering."

Well, that left two possibilities. The first was that the stranger was in sufficient difficulties to render his broadcast instrumentation inoperative.

The second was that O'Shea was in a lot of trouble and needed help, but fast.

"We've got a hold full of dilithium to protect, not to mention that drug," he ventured. "I don't like people who come at me fast and silent. Evasive maneuvers."

Fushi and Elijah were good. They tried right-left angle shifts. They put the *Huron* through turns warp-drive craft weren't designed for. They sent her galloping off course in a random-number spiral.

None of it fazed their silent pursuer. Whatever sought close contact with them was simply too fast to be denied. Time and again it would slip off the *Huron*'s screens, only to reappear moments later. And with each new maneuver tried, each option exhausted, the alien grew harder and harder to shake. Their pilots might not have been any better - but their navigational computer and engines were clearly designed for more intricate work than traveling from point *A* to point *B*.

"It's no good, sir," a tired Fushi confessed. "Not only can't we lose them, they're still closing on us."

"All rigiht." O'Shea was running down a list of responses to possible challenges. "Resume course, and send out an emergency signal to the *Enterprise*. By drone. Subtly."

"Yes, sir." He programed the drone properly, sent it on its robotic way. "Might be a good idea to ready a backup, in case." His hands moved to make the necessary demands on the *Huron*'s equipment - and hesitated as a certain telltale commenced a steady winking.

"Message coming in, sir."

"I can see that, man. Let's hear it."

Elijah acknowledged the call, put it on the speaker. They had cut in mid-broadcast.

It didn't matter. The message directed at them was as understandable as it was incomplete.

"...or prepare to be destroyed. Stand by to surrender your cargo or prepare..."

II

"Captain, I'm getting a signal from the *Huron* - by automatic emergency beacon."

Kirk stiffened in his seat. "Are we close enough for direct ship-to-ship contact yet?"

Uhura checked a readout. "Possible, sir - fringe tangency."

"Try it"

"Yes, sir." There was a pause, then, "Nothing, sir. Either we're still too far off or - it's definitely an emergency beacon doing the broadcasting." She didn't have to elaborate.

"Sensor report, Mr. Spock. Have they reached the designated coordinates?" It took Spock several seconds longer than usual to make the check and reply.

"No, sir. Long-range scanners also indicate a course change. They are veering off - and have reduced speed considerably."

"Compute new course to intercept, Mr. Arex. Lieutenant Uhura, keep trying to make contact. Let's find out what's going on -"

It took longer than Kirk expected to make the rendezvous, not because of the course change but because the *Huron* had not merely cut speed - she had practically stopped.

Visual contact soon revealed the reasons why. The freighter sat there on the main viewscreen, drifting aimlessly in space. All entreaties for acknowledgment were ignored with frightening uniformity.

Spock's attention was on his hooded viewer. "The *Huron*'s power levels are functioning at the bare minimum required to maintain life-support systems, Captain. And sensors are picking up considerable metallic and other inorganic debris."

"Natural cause?"

Spock looked up from the viewer. "No, Captain. Extrapolating from preliminary data I would say without qualification that she was attacked. Indications are ... indications are..." He swayed in his chair, eyelids fluttering.

"Spock!"

For a moment the first officer's eyes opened wide and clear. Then a faint suggestion of uncertainty crossed that stolid visage. "Captain, I..."

Kirk started forward - caught the limp form before it struck the floor. Uhura was already on the intercom.

"Bridge to Sick Bay - *Emergency*!"

***

Kirk felt no need to ask McCoy for a detailed interpretation of the readings that winked on and off on the screen above Spock's head. Anyone with a minimal knowledge of Vulcan physiology could see that they were appallingly low.

McCoy studied he unconscious Vulcan. "We've got to have that strobolin, Jim. The synthetic is useless now - hell, it's been useless for half a day! He has lapsed into coma." He looked unwaveringly at Kirk.

"If we don't get that drug soon, very soon, hell never come out of it."

"Do what you can, Bones." It sounded pitifully inadequate. "And I'll - I'll do what *I* can."

Now they had another problem to cope with. What had happened to the *Huron*? He gave McCoy a hesitant,

encouraging pat on the back and left Sick Bay.

McCoy watched him go, his one note of satisfaction in this being Kirk's continued steadiness; then he turned his attention back to his patient. He examined the readouts again. For the moment they were unchanged. Temporary, false pleasure - they could only change for the worse.

"Blasted Vulcan!" he yelled at the motionless form, "Why couldn't you have red blood like any normal man?"

He prayed for a comforting insult.

He got only sibilant breathing - and silence.

***

Arex was manning Spock's station as Sulu positioned the *Enterprise* close to the unresponsive *Huron*.

"Status?" Kirk queried sharply, striding out of the elevator.

"Her engines are dead," Arex reported, studying the telltale sensor screen. "Backup battery power is operating life-support systems at a low but acceptable level."

"Anyone left alive?"

"There appears to be, sir. Several weak readings. I can't tell how many for certain."

"We'll find out soon enough. Mr. Scott, Lieutenant Uhura, come with me. Mr. Sulu, you have the con. We're beaming over to the *Huron*."

***

Dissolution ... nausea ... teasing oblivion ... reassembly.

Kirk looked around and saw that Kyle had put them exactly where he had specified. They were standing on the *Huron*'s bridge. Or rather, on what was left of it.

It looked as if something had taken the *Huron* by its stern and slammed the upper end against a nickel-iron asteroid. Signs of severe concussion were everywhere - in the shattered gauge covers, the slight ooze of liquid around loosened paneling from cracked fluid-state switches, in the decided chill in the air from the release of super-cooled gases.

Further evidence was to be found in the condition of two of the three skulls belonging to the crew.

Chapel made a quick examination of the physical damage and tended to Fushi, the most severely injured of the three, first. Whatever had battered the *Huron* had made no distinction between accouterments living and dead. Her three officers were scattered about the bridge with the same disregard and in the same condition as the furnishings.

Kirk waited with agonized impatience as Chapel moved quickly from Fushi to O'Shea to Elijah.

"They'll all live," she said finally. Kirk turned.

"Scotty, check the cargo hold for the strobolin. Every freighter has a double-walled refrigerated chamber for storing extremely valuable cargo. It should be located close by the central accessway. The drug will be in it."

"Aye, sir." Scott turned, started back into the bowels of the ship.

"Uhura, see if you can get a playback off their log. I want to know what happened here."

Uhura nodded, moved to the chaos of the fore control console and commenced trying to make sense out of the tangle of wiring, torn metal and shredded plastics.

Kirk examined what was left of the small engineering station, wished Scotty were around to explain the destruction. Whatever had ruined the freighter had been guided by an intelligence with a definite purpose in mind. The damage here was severe - but still controlled. Something had disabled the freighter without destroying it.

It was difficult to fault their thoroughness. True, they had left O'Shea and his crew alive - barely. But there was no reason to expect three severely wounded men drifting powerless in a little-frequented section of space and existing on stored energy to ever be rescued and bear witness against their attacker.

No, the *Huron* might very well have gone down on shipping schedules as just one of those infrequent vessels marked "never arrived - cause unknown," if it weren't for the fact that the ship was to meet the oncoming *Enterprise* in free space. Something Kirk doubted her attackers had known, or they would have taken care to leave no one alive. They had made a mistake.

Possibly a fatal one.

There was a buzz close by, and Kirk flipped on his communicator.

"Scott to Captain Kirk," the familiar voice of the chief engineer came. Kirk glanced around the shattered bridge. Chapel had turned her ministrations to O'Shea. Uhura deftly avoided a sudden shower of sparks, then bent with renewed vigor to the task of extricating the remnants of the *Huron*'s log.

"Kirk here ... all steady forward, Scotty. Report."

"I'm in the main bay, Captain. The *Huron*'s equipped with a security bin, all right - only it's been forced. It's as empty as the rest of the cargo hold. There's nothin' down here, Captain."

"No sign of the strobolin?"

"Not a single ampoule, Captain. The *Huron*'s listed cargo for this trip was dilithium. Not a crystal in sight, either. The hold's been stripped clean."

"Life-support systems?"

"Stable here. No, if this was caused by a natural disaster it's been repaired with the slickest patch job I've ever seen. Also,

it must have been a mighty selective disaster. The only major damage is to the security chamber and the cargo locks. I kinna tell for sure from this distance, but I think they were blown open and then resealed."

"All right, Mr. Scott. Report back up here."

"Aye, Sir. Sorry I am..."

No drug, a voice howled in Kirk's mind. No drug, no drug! He flipped off the communicator and walked over next to the busy Uhura. She looked up at him and wiped a forearm across her brow. The humidity was bad in here and getting worse, despite the valiant efforts of the damaged life-support system.

"All recorders are gone, sir - but indications are that the log tapes are intact. I think I can extricate them without damage. Well have to play them back on board ship, though."

"Good enough. Lieutenant." He left her to her work and turned his attention back to Chapel. She continued to labor on O'Shea.

"How is he, Nurse?"

"Scrambled inside, concussion upstairs - he needs surgery but," she smiled slightly, "he'll live, Captain. Nothing we can't fix. Another couple of days, though, and all three of them would have been gone."

Kirk moved away, thinking hard. He flipped the communicator open again just as Scott re-entered the bridge.

"Kirk to *Enterprise*. We're ready to beam over, Arex. Have a full medical team standing by. We need -" he glanced at Chapel, who nodded approval as he spoke, "- three pallets with tech-teams. Tell Dr. McCoy he's got a triple surgery on his hands."

"Very good, sir," the thin voice piped back.

They left the *Huron* where and as it was, it's automatic beacon still calling plaintively to an indifferent universe. Scott

had installed a fully charged power pack to run the beacon when the freighter's emergency batteries finally gave out.

The shattered transport could be recovered later, by someone else. Right now something other than salvage dominated Kirk's thoughts. And Scott's, and McCoy's, and Sulu's - and those of every other member of the *Enterprise*'s crew - though they might not have admitted it.

Such thoughts were doubtlessly the cause of the pounding headache Kirk suffered from as he paced the outer room of the Sick Bay. His attention was gratefully drawn from the miners excavating his skull when McCoy entered from a side doorway. The reflective figure, clad in transparent surgical garb, beckoned Kirk to a familiar chamber.

Kirk walked past the base of the bed where Spock lay immobile. He glanced once at the diagnostic readouts on the screen above, looked hurriedly away. By now even the figures were painful to see.

He turned in time to see O'Shea wheeled in from surgery. Two medical techs transferred the *Huron*'s captain gently from the mobile pallet to a duplicate of the bed Spock lay in.

Both officers walked over, McCoy peeling the protective sealer from his face. "How's this one, Bones?"

"Oh, he'll pull through all right, Jim. Just a little rearrangement of his plumbing ... no permanent damage." He paused. "Jim, what the hell are we going to do about Spock?"

"The best we can, Bones."

*Tm not sure that's going to be good enough, Jim."

Kirk could see that McCoy was sorry for the words as soon as he had said them. He was under more pressure than anyone else on board just now, and it manifested itself as frustration.

Probably there was nothing as agonizing to a doctor of Bones' ability as knowing exactiy what to do to cure a patient and simply not having the material to do it with.

"If we don't have that strobolin in twenty hours, he'll die," McCoy continued flatly. "That's a minimal figure, but it's pretty accurate. I wouldn't like to have to stretch it even five minutes."

There was nothing he could say ... just as there was nothing he could do.

No, no - that wasn't entirely true. There was still a chance, still some hope. The dimness of the readings on the diagnostic indicators over Spock's head were matched by the snail's pace of his thoughts.

"We still might -"

"Might what, Jim?"

"Wait till I see the log tapes we took off the *Huron*. If they're wiped, or if the recorder was destroyed too soon -" He stopped abruptly. "See you later, Bones. Do what you can for Spock, and let me know the minute any of those three," he nodded to where Elijah was being brought in to join O'Shea, "recover sufficiently to talk."

Never enough time, he thought, never enough...

***

As Arex ran the *Huron* tapes through the library computer, Kirk stood nearby and urged the dawdling computer to faster action.

Eventually, the Edoan made his equivalent of a satisfied sigh. "Some of the last tape was burned, Captain. I've been able to reconstruct the damaged sections, however. The *Huron* was definitely, as we suspected, attacked by another vessel. It is interesting to observe that the belligerent ship is a new design, one apparently never before encountered by a Federation ship. There is also evidence to suggest that it possesses an older form of propulsion than modern warp drive."

"I don't care if it came from the far side of M one one three eight and is powered by ten million invisible gerbils - all I want to know is, can we track it?"

"That's the significance of its out-of-date drive, sir. If you'll look here..."

He hit a switch. Immediately a blank grid appeared on the small screen above the science console. Another control produced a star-chart nearby. Arex made a last adjustment and the two blended together.

Kirk squinted. There were glowing dots on the composite screen which were not stars.

"The *Huron*'s attacker may be sophisticated in many ways," Arex explained, "but its propulsive units are possessed of a few archaic features. One of these is that they generate a faint residue of radioactive particulate matter. Unless they are aware of us and have carefully laid a false trail for us to follow - which I strongly doubt - we should be able to find them.

"The most recent deposits give a bearing of two hundred twelve plus, one hundred seventy-five minus to the Galactic ecliptic. The half-life of the ejected material is quite short. If we had arrived on the scene as much as three days late, our sensors would have found nothing."

"Lay in that course!" Kirk shouted back to the helm. "Ahead warp seven, Mr. Sulu." He turned back to Arex. "Run through those tapes again - slowly, Lieutenant - and let me know if you find anything else you think significant. I'll be down in Sick Bay."

Kirk found McCoy seated at his desk, his head resting in his hands. "How is he, Bones."

"Worse than he was when you left, Jim," McCoy replied, looking up. "And he'll be worse the next time, and worse after that ... until we get that drug.

"It's his breathing that worries me most. Pretty soon I'm going to have to put him on forced respiration. That'll draw

reserves from other parts of his body already hard-pressed by the disease."

"Well, we're following the attacking ship's trail." Teeth gleamed. "We're going to crawl right up -"

"Ship?" McCoy interrupted. "How do we know there's only one ship involved in this?"

"Lieutenant Arex is certain the radioactive residue comes from a single vessel."

"Sure, only one ship *attacked* the *Huron*. What happens if they rendezvous with another and transfer cargo? Or with two others, or make multiple transfers?"

"Dammit, Bones," Kirk half shouted, "this one's got to be the *only* one. It's *got* to be." McCoy looked apologetic, but Kirk waved off the incipient sorrys.

"Don't complicate things with factual possibilities, okay? If there's more than one ship, well ... that's probably it, then. We haven't enough time to go chasing all over the cosmos after several ships, even if their trails would last that long."

"A transfer," McCoy finished relentlessly, "would seem the logical thing to do." His voice cracked on the word "logical."

"Sure, *if* you anticipate immediate pursuit. But every sign points to these beings - whoever they are - not expecting another vessel in this region. Certainly not one capable of overtaking them.

"The tapes indicate they weren't much on conversation. Chances are that if O'Shea had been given the opportunity to explain he was about to rendezvous with a heavy cruiser, they might have called off the whole thing."

"I'm sure that'll be a great consolation to O'Shea when he comes around," snorted McCoy. He walked slowly back to stare down at Spock.

"What's the good of being a physician, anyway?" Kirk heard him mutter angrily. "We're only as good as current drugs and technology make us. We've got a few more books, a little more knowledge. Eliminate all the mechanical conveniences, and I might as well be practicing in the middle ages. There's nothing *I* can do for him." He walked a few steps away, slammed a hand against the door sill.

"Me - me, I'm helpless. Totally dependent on instrumentation and pre-programed chemicals. There isn't a thing I personally can do. So what's the point of it - what's the point?" He stared down at the floor.

"Better to be an engineer like Scotty. If one of his patients burns out, there's always a replacement in the catalog." A hollow laugh forced itself out.

Silence.

Then, "If you really believed that, Bones," Kirk told him softly, "you wouldn't still be a doctor after twenty-five years. *Especially* a ship's doctor.

"And that's something else I've always wondered about, Bones. Why did you bother entering the service? With your skill you could have made a fortune in government or private practice."

McCoy glanced back sharply, an unfathomable expression on his face. "You're going to find this funny, Jim, but ... I entered the service instead of striking out on my own because I'm greedy."

"Greedy? As Spock would say, that sounds like an irrefutable contradiction in terms."

McCoy shook his head. "It's no different for me than for you, Jim. I'm here because challenge means more to me than money. And because money can't buy a sense of accomplishment.

"Besides, could you see me sitting in a private clinic on Demolos or on Earth, pandering to the private phobias of

overweight matrons and spoiled kids?"

"I admit it's a tough scene to picture," Kirk agreed, amused. "I'm glad your avarice drove you to become doctor on this ship."

"Listen," McCoy began, "if Spock pulls through -"

"You mean *when* Spock pulls through," Kirk countered forcefully. "When Spock pulls through I'll see what can be done about rounding up some more interesting illnesses for you to play with. I don't want you feeling unchallenged."

"Thanks awfully, Jim," McCoy responded, a touch of his normal sarcasm coming back. "I'd appreciate some really different germs for a change. Trouble is, the people on this ship refuse to cooperate. You're all too damned healthy."

Kirk turned to leave. "Well Bones, you've got nobody to blame but yourself."

***

The dilithium, Kirk mused as he strolled down the corridor, he could understand. As good as currency - no, better. A load of good crystals would be easy to market to some of the Federation's less reputable concerns. Or to any of many non-Federation worlds.

But why did they take the strobolin? Why? Pirates would hardly have known what it was. And if they had, they would have realized it wasn't particularly valuable - it was demand, not rarity, that was responsible for that.

Come to think of it, he considered as he entered the lift, that was probably it. They had taken the strobolin out of ignorance, reasoning that anything worth protecting so well was worth appropriating.

If only they had left the drug, he could have overlooked the assault, forgotten the injuries, ignored the monetary loss. Suddenly he grew cold as he realized that they might now have discovered the drug's true value and simply have

destroyed it, or dumped it in space - out of anger, perhaps, for the valuables the security chamber had failed to yield.

He tried not to think about it, just as he tried to ignore McCoy's hypothesis about intership transfers of the stolen goods.

In one way the situation was made simple for him. Because of the restrictions imposed by time, he was reduced to only one course of action, spared the need of choosing among several tortuous possibles.

All they could do was follow the thread of radioactive residue and hope it led to the intact ampoules of strobolin. Hope it did so quickly.

Exiting onto the bridge he automatically scanned left to right, insured himself that everyone who belonged at his/her post was present. Arex, he noticed as he took his seat in the command chair, was back at the navigator's station.

Handling the dual assignment was hard on the Edoan, he knew. But he was a better backup to have there than anyone else in a situation like this. Sulu could cover for him where necessary.

Besides, he mused bitterly, one way or the other the navigator wouldn't have to occupy the dual position much longer.

"Report."

"Emanations from the radioactive matter still registering strongly on applied sensors, Captain," Sulu informed him. "Bearing still two hundred twelve plus, one hundred seventy-five minus. We are moving up on a massive grouping of solid material."

"Slow to standard cruising speed," Kirk ordered, fingers tap-tapping on an arm of the chair. "Free-space asteroidal belt or globe," he muttered to himself.

Sulu was busily replacing the abstract information listed on the main screen with a view from the ship's fore scanners.

Such groupings, Kirk reflected, were not common, but neither were they rare enough to arouse unusual interest.

Visual sightings confirmed that this was a normal collage, jagged fragments ranging in size from microscopic pebbles to a few moon-sized specimens. At the moment, however, abstract analysis was far from his mind.

"The trail of radioactives enters the group and begins a weaving pattern, Captain," Sulu reported.

Kirk nodded slightly. He had half expected as much. They had been closing steadily on their quarry, judging by the upsurge in radioactive intensity of the trail. This was the closest thing to a hiding place open space offered to an interstellar craft

"They're taking evasive action. A sensible maneuver, wouldn't you say, Mr. Sulu?"

"The ideal place to try and shake us, Captain," the helmsman agreed. "Especially if there are any natural concentrations of radioactives in this belt." He studied his port instrumentation.

"Preliminary indications point to many of the asteriods as having unusual energy properties that -" He stopped, staring at a particular readout.

"Share it with all of us, Mr. Sulu," Kirk said sharply.

"Extreme-range sensor scan indicates that the trail of radioactive debris we have been following ends in the approximate center of the grouping."

"Could be trying to cover their trail somehow, trying to throw us off by running on a different drive system, or perhaps arranging some kind of unpleasant welcome," Kirk murmured, to no one in particular. "We can be sure of one thing, now - they know they're being pursued." He glanced back to Uhura. "All deflectors up - sound yellow alert, Lieutenant. Mr. Sulu, cut speed and maintain evasive approach pattern."

A chorused "Aye, sir" came back to him, while bright flashes paired with suitably cacophonous whoops resounded

throughout the starship.

"All sections secured and ready, Captain," Uhura was able to report minutes later.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Approaching unknown's approximate sphere of confluence. Stand by for -"

A brilliant flare momentarily obliterated the scene depicted on the viewscreen, and the *Enterprise* shook to the force of destructive energies.

"What in the Pleiades was that?" Judging from the violence of the flare, alarm horns should have been sounding steadily.

Arex worked furiously to secure an answer. What he learned wasn't exactly encouraging, but neither did it appear they were under attack from some kind of unknown superweapon.

"Unusual energy properties indeed, Captain. It seems certain asteroids are composed of anti-matter. This entire belt is remarkable for having both matter and anti-matter existing side by side - a highly unstable configuration."

"Walking on a field of mined eggshells is more like it," Uhura suggested.

"All fragments explode on contact with each other - decidedly a dangerous place for a chase, Captain," the navigator finished.

"Their maneuverability's reduced, too, don't forget that," Kirk countered, scowling at the screen as if the universe were personally trying to make his life miserable. It was not a new sensation.

"Keep those deflectors on maximum, Mr. Scott." The chief engineer acknowledged the order from his place at the bridge engineering console.

"Captain? There's enough power locked in this belt to run whole fleets of starships. It would require a major industrial effort to tap it, but the amount of potential energy involved -"

"Enough to do a lot of damage, also, Mr. Scott. Steady and easy, Mr. Sulu, steady and easy." Sulu nodded.

They continued on through the belt, crawling impatiently along the still radiant, damning trail. Deeper and deeper into the grouping they moved. Only the occasional flare of antagonistic elements obliterating each other in inorganic suicide registered on the sensors.

Finally something else rocked the *Enterprise*. It was a substantial jolt, but no one was thrown from his seat, and Uhura was soon able to report all sections in with no damage, no casualties.

This time the buffeting was caused not by matter-anti-matter disintegration, but by a deep blue beam which had struck at the *Enterprise* from just over the horizon of a large asteroid below and to starboard.

"Mr. Sulu!"

"Fractional calibration completed, Captain. They're running, but I've got them."

"Pursuit speed, Mr. Sulu. Phasers stand by."

It was only a matter of minutes, now. As they passed he considered strategy.

Chances were their assailant had taken his best shot first, hoping to disable the *Enterprise* before she could retaliate. But the barrage they had taken wasn't anything on, say, the order of what a Klingon battle cruiser could put out - though it could have messed them up pretty badly if the deflectors had not been up.

On the olher hand, the belligerent vessel's commander might be trying to draw the *Enterprise* into a more tactically advantageous position for him. It was too soon to judge. Best be ready for anything.

First round to the *Enterprise*, though - the attacker had forfeited the element of surprise.

The starfield pinwheeled on the screen. One glowing blob - blood red, unround, and of irregular outline - was finally locked into its center.

"Hold them, Mr. Sulu." Another probing blue light momentarily erased the view. "Analysis?"

Sulu was working smoothly, efficiently at the controls. "Standard frigate-class phasers, sir, slightly modified.

"Plenty hot enough to make scrap of an unarmed freighter like the *Huron*. They'll never get through our screens," Kirk noted with satisfaction.

"Captain," Arex broke in, "I've finally placed the ship's markings. It's an Orion vessel."

"Orion," Kirk echoed thoughtfully. The Orions were an isolated, humanoid race who stuck close to their small system of three inhabited worlds and shunned contact with outsiders. There had never been any reason to suspect them of antagonism toward other peoples. They were simply thought to be naturally reclusive - until now, he mused furiously.

They were very human-like, but emphatically not interested in joining up with the Federation, with the Klingon Empire, or with anyone else. The corollary was that members of those and other multistellar political leagues expressed little interest in expanding relations with the Orions.

The perfect cover, Kirk reflected, for some wide-scale, unsuspected piracy. He found himself wondering how many ships had been pushed onto the missing-and-presumed-lost register at Starfleet HQ through the intervention of the *indifferent* Orions.

"They're hailing us, Captain," Uhura announced, just as he was about to order the first phaser burst.

"Put them through, Lieutenant."

Uhura made the necessary adjustments, and they were rewarded by the face of the Orion captain. It was

accompanied by a harsh, defiant voice forming comprehensible words. It affected Kirk, who had been threatened by the commanders of full battle fleets, not in the least.

Had O'Shea or Fushi or Elijah been present, however, the first response to the alien's words would have been immediate and distinguished by its colorful invective.

"*Enterprise*," the Orion commander began, indicating that their detection instrumentation was working as well as their diffusion beam, "we demand you cease your pursuit immediately. As a representative of a recognized neutral government, I must protest."

Kirk controlled his anger with an effort. For the moment he had to try diplomacy. Besides, the Orion commander was technically correct.

"This is Captain James T. Kirk, commanding. Who said we were engaged in a pursuit?" The Orion didn't change expression. "We detected a malfunction in your phaser systems and thought you might require aid. You are experiencing a malfunction?" He grinned sardonically.

"No - but the way you crept up on us, we could not be certain your intentions were not hostile."

"I compliment you on your method of discovering whether or not they were," Kirk snapped back. "It leaves no room for idle speculation. As for your neutrality, Orion's position has been in dispute ever since the affair regarding the Cordian planets and the Babel Concordance of stardate ... well, I'm sure you're familiar with both date and circumstances.

"But it's a matter of more recent history that concerns me at the moment, Captain. Yesterday a Federation freighter, the *Huron*, was attacked in this quadrant, its cargo hijacked. As the first alien vessel encountered in the area, we request you to submit to search, as per Babel Resolution A twelve. Do you require time to consider your response?"

The Orion didn't go for the lead. A request for time would constitute an admission of guilt. Instead, the Orion managed a respectable smile.

"Orions are not thieves. I am sorrowed to hear of the hijacking of the Federation ship. We certainly hope you find the instigators of such villainy. As for ourselves, we hold no Federation cargo of any kind. And our papers permitting us to travel in this sector are quite in order. I must insist, Captain, that you end your hostilities toward us. If this harrassment does not cease instantly, we will lodge a formal protest with your government."

Kirk made a quick slashing motion, glanced back over his shoulder as the Orion's image vanished. "Tell him to stand by, Uhura."

"All right, sir." There was a brief pause, then she looked back at him. "They want to know why, sir."

"Tell them I have some internal bodily functions to attend to. If they want further details, supply them."

"Sir," Uhura responded readily.

"Mr. Sulu, anything yet?"

"A second, sir, I'm reconfirming." The helmsman had been working furiously at the project ever since they had made close contact with the Orions. He proved as good as his word, looked back to the command chair wearing a smug grin.

"Sensors confirm the presence of massive amounts of dilithium on board the alien ship, sir. It must be packed in their spare rooms and empty corridors. They're fairly bulging with it."

"What about the strobolin?" Kirk demanded.

Sulu's smile faded. "According to what I've been told, there was no reason for the drug to be shipped in large amount, sir. If they have it, it's too small a quantity to detect through their hull."

Kirk grunted. "All right Reopen the channel, Lieutenant."

"Channel open, sir," Uhura replied as the puzzled face of the alien commander reappeared on the screen.

"*Enterprise* to Orion vessel, Kirk here," he began. He had made a mental note of how careful the Orion Captain had been in avoiding the mention of his name, those of any of his crew, or his ship.

"I have a proposal to make. If, by some miraculous chance, you *did* happen to encounter the *Huron* and if you decided - in the interests of common decency - to salvage its valuable cargo, and if by chance you overlooked the three -" his voice rose slightly "- critically injured personnel on board, you might also have obtained a small quantity of perishable drugs from a no doubt accidentally opened security chamber. We need those drugs rather desperately."

The Orion commander was manifestly not an idiot. Kirk could see the gears spinning in his opposite number's head while the silence lengthened. Finally, the other commander looked up and ventured softly, "What would this drug be worth to you - frivolously assuming we had experienced the totally unlikely series of circumstances you detailed?"

Kirk leaned forward, his fingers clenching tighter than he wished on the arms of the chair.

"You keep the dilithium shipment. No mention of the entire incident to Starfleet or in my log. Plus an additional standardweight container of dilithium as...," he hesitated, grinned tightly, "...payment for the *salvaged* drug."

Another long silence while the Orion commander appeared to consider the offer. When he continued there was a hint of suspicion in his tone - understandable enough under the circumstances. But there was something else, an undefinable something Kirk detected which hinted almost of desperation.

Obviously he understood his strategic position. He had lost the element of surprise. He had lost the chance that the

Enterprise might run afoul of an unexpected matter-anti-matter explosion.

Despite his natural instincts he probably found himself in a position where he would have to risk the deal.

"We keep the dilithium," he said finally, cautiously, "plus, our neutrality remains intact?"

Kirk nodded. A briefer pause this time, before the alien commander replied firmly, "We will consider your proposal."

"Very well. But make it fast. Kirk out." He immediately switched to intercom. "Kirk to Sick Bay."

"McCoy here," came the rapid reply.

"Bones ... how much time?"

"Less than an hour, Jim. The strobolin'll be ninety percent-plus effective right up till the end - not much longer than an hour. His internal collapse is starting to snowball. There's not much I can do to slow it and damn little I can do to halt it. If I had one lousy ampoule -"

"Hold on a little longer, Bones, a little longer. We're close, very close, to getting it."

"The Orion is hailing us, sir," Uhura interrupted apologetically.

"I know you can do it, Bones."

"It's not up to me anymore, Jim," the filtered reply came back. "It's up to that abstract community of proteins we call Spock. Skill doesn't matter anymore - just chemistry."

"Kirk out." He swiveled. "All right, Lieutenant, I'll take the call now." He steeled himself for whatever answer the Orions might give.

"Your proposal is agreeable, Captain..."

Kirk slumped a little in his chair.

"...with one qualification."

Kirk sat straight again, suddenly wary. "What kind of qualification?"

"Whether your people come for the drug or we transfer it to you involves the interchange of at most, minor personnel. Expendables." Kirk started to protest, but the Orion commander made a tired gesture requesting silence and Kirk forced himself to sit back quietly.

"No aspersions intended, Captain. But without assuming any real risk, you could obtain what you want and then turn on us."

"What," Kirk replied slowly, "would it take to convince you of our sincerity?"

"More persuasion than the universe possesses. However, we will settle for a face-to-face exchange, the drug for the container of dilithium. In the absence of available absolutes, risking one's own neck is considered the best substitute. I will meet you myself."

"Face to face." All kinds of danger signals were going off inside him. "Where?"

"An extremely large planetoid close by my ship. You doubtless have it on your screens. It has an atmosphere acceptable to both of us. We can predetermine the time and beam down simultaneously. I will hand you the drug personally.

"Your own presence will be most reassuring, Captain. Compared to it, the extra dilithium crystals are superfluous." A faint, nebulous hint of humor. "I believe we can do without them." He assumed a rigid, waiting posture. "Now it is your turn to consider."

"I'd... like to consult with my staff."

The alien made a sign of agreement.

"You'll receive an answer shortly. Kirk out."

III

"It's got to be some sort of trap, Jim." McCoy's fist slammed into the smooth wood of the briefing room table top in an uncharacteristically violent gesture.

"I don't buy this business of not trusting 'expendable' subordinates. I don't believe it anymore than I believe this space-pucky about your own presence being required on the exchange to satisfy some inexplicable alien sense of uneasiness. What's wrong with your giving personal assurance by communicator? I'll bet they've cooked up this whole scheme just to get a clean shot at you!"

Kirk's reply was noncommittal. "Maybe my presence is required for spiritual reasons, Bones. We don't know much about Orion culture, you know. Still," he added, forestalling another Aesculapian outburst, "I find myself agreeing with you."

"No doubt of it in my mind," Scott added from the far end of the table.

"Yeah. Sure." Kirk put both hands on the table, leaned forward intensely. "It could be a trap. But we've got no time to consider options, no time to devise means of devious subtlety to secure the strobolin.

"If we don't get our hands on it *fast*, Spock is going to die. Would he do less in a similar situation for any of us?"

McCoy was shaking his head sadly. "Why did you bother with this meeting, Jim. You had already made up your mind."

"Yes," Kirk confessed, "I had. But I wanted to see if either of you had another option to put forward - however hare-brained. Obviously, you don't."

"Oh, we're not going to do this without precautions - don't worry on that score. My communicator channel will be frozen open so that every word of what goes on will be broadcast on the bridge - even if it seems to the Orion Captain that I turned it off.

"Scotty, you'll be ready at the transporter, which will be locked on me at all times. At the first sign of anything underhanded, well...," he stared at his chief engineer, "I'm trusting you."

"If this doesn't work, Jim," McCoy went on worriedly, "we could lose Spock and you."

"Nothing unique about the situation, Bones. Men have been going through similar ordeals since the dawn of civilization." He exchanged glances with each in turn. "Let's go to it, gentlemen, double or nothing."

***

The bridge of the Orion pirate was considerably smaller than its spacious counterpart on the *Enterprise*. Its complement was correspondingly reduced.

But the officers who manned its compact consoles and panels had more to worry about.

Everything had gone so well, her captain reflected, brooding in the command chair. The *Huron* had proven a rich prize, and they had ambushed her well out of communications range of any other ship. With no armament to speak of and a small crew, she had been an easy take.

Only this *gisjacheh* drug, this strobolin, had been intended not for delivery to some distant world, but for a free-space ship-to-ship transfer. To a ship already dangerously near. To a Federation battle cruiser, no less!

Now, despite his helmsman's best efforts to elude pursuit, the huge vessel had run him down and cornered him here. When he considered what would happen if news of the *Huron* attack ever reached diplomatic channels, he had made the inevitable decision. The only decision possible, really.

But to be sure first, as is the *bya-chee* bird before striking. He looked down to his executive officer.

"Status, Cophot?"

"We can't outgun the *Enterprise* and we can't outrun it, *Elt*. Nor can we penetrate her shields sufficiently to discourage her."

"No chance of escape?" he pressed.

"No, *Elt*, none."

The commander made his racial analog of a sigh, found no inspiration in a moment's meditation. "Orion's official neutrality comes before this ship, its crew - or its commander. There is too much at stake to take the word of one man - any man. He cannot give enough assurances that he will not at some time report the incident to Starfleet."

"No, sir," his exec admitted. "The only way to prevent that now is by achieving the destruction of the *Enterprise*. And the only way to do that," he hesitated in spite of himself, "is to destroy ourselves, too."

"Agreed. I had thought perhaps, an unexpected surge on our part, at the moment of exchange. Ram, overload their shields -"

"Your pardon, *Elt*," his first officer objected, "but there is a better way." He looked suddenly reluctant.

"Well, come on, out with all, Cophot."

"These asteroids," the other began, "contain among their number many which are anti-matter. Of those that are matter, many contain a high proportion of unstable radioactives. No

danger to a man, they are concentrated in the planetary core, as in -"

"The one below us, that I'm scheduled to meet Captain Kirk on?" Understanding dawned.

"I have ascertained that this is so," the executive officer admitted. "Both ships will lay to hard by the planetoid. So close, if the core is triggered to reaction, both will be destroyed, despite the strongest defensive screens any ship could mount. The difficulty lies in the method of detonation. Mere phaser fire will not suffice."

"What then?"

"An adequately powerful explosive, which would provide the minimum number of high-energy particles. The material to make such a compact device has been providentially provided for us.

"Dilithium, yes," the commander agreed. "How could such a device be triggered?"

"I can manufacture a remote control which will -"

The captain's eyes brightened, and he waved his exec off.

"No, no. I've a better idea, Cophot. I'll do it by hand, carry the device down with me when I go to meet Kirk. I want the satisfaction of handing him his precious medicine and then seeing his face when I tell him he and his entire crew are going to the Dark Place with us. Besides, do not underestimate the detection equipment of this class of Federation cruiser. It could detect an old shoe beamed down to the surface, not to mention your proposed exterminator package."

"As you wish it, *Elt*," the science officer said admiringly. "I will commence work."

"Be certain, Cophot, you do a worthy job. It is not everyday one has the privilege of composing the mechanics of one's own destruction."

The first officer made a silent gesture of concurrence.

"A call coming in from the *Enterprise*, *Elt*," the voice of the communications master broke in. The Orion commander turned his attention from his first officer back to the viewscreen.

"What is your decision, Captain Kirk?"

"I accept your terms."

"Very well," the *elt* replied, keeping his tone carefully level. "We will provide suggested coordinates, or -" he performed the movements of indifference "- you may select them yourself. We will beam down in fifteen of your minutes."

Kirk stared at the screen, noticed McCoy's glum expression.

"What now, Bones?"

"I still don't like it, Jim, but as you said, we haven't got any more time. Spock..." He shook his head slowly.

The Orion commander spoke again, "Fifteen minutes or not at all, Captain Kirk."

"Yes, yes," Kirk replied absently. "Agreed. *Enterprise* out."

The screen blanked.

***

It was a world of compact extinction, where one could see the work of oblivion in small doses, and comprehend.

True, it possessed a breathable atmosphere, a thin gaseous envelope through which jagged mountains rose against a deep purple curtain. Nothing crawled over its pockmarked surface. Nothing flew through its sad sky.

It was not an embryonic world, awaiting only the right combination of heat and water to give birth. Rather it was a king among cinders, a shard of some long gone larger globe which in itself had never seen life.

But now life appeared on its surface, in the form of two electrically hued pillars. There was nothing to observe this visitation save the constituents of the pillars themselves. The two commanders rematerialized barely a couple of meters apart.

Immediately the Orion captain noticed the tricorder Kirk held in one hand, while Kirk's gaze went first to the overlarge backpack slung over the Orion's shoulders.

Consideration of its purpose and contents were forgotten as his eyes were drawn down to the plastic cylinder the other held. It was filled with tiny cylinders, and they in turn were filled with the fluid that could give life to the dying Spock.

Most of the printing on the cylinder's label was too small to read at the distance he stood from it, but the name strobolin stood out clearly above the archaic red-cross symbol. So that there would be no doubt, the Orion took several steps closer and held the container out to him for a better look.

"As promised, Captain, your serum. Scan it if you wish." He gestured at the tricorder.

McCoy had preset the sensors himself. Kirk pointed it at the translucent cylinder, pressed a switch. If the contents of the container were something cleverly designed to simulate strobolin, they would have to be the work of a master chemist. McCoy had gone over the 'corder's programing a dozen times.

The reading the intricate mechanism showed was clear, however. There wasn't a hint of molecular funny business. On the starship's bridge, everyone breathed a sigh of relief as the captain's voice sounded over the open communicator.

"Pure strobolin, Bones." He rolled the container of dilithium over the smooth surface. It bumped to a halt against the Orion's legs.

"My half of the bargain. Want to check it?"

"No, Captain Kirk. I trust you."

"*Now* you trust me." Kirk shrugged. "However you please, I'll take that now and then we can both beam up." He reached for the cylinder.

The Orion commander skipped backwards a few steps.

"No, Captain Kirk, I'm afraid I can't permit that. You see, no matter how I strive to convince myself, I can't believe that word of this incident will not ultimately reach your superiors. If that happens, my world will lose its neutrality and be subject to Federation retaliation."

"Look," an exasperated Kirk began, "we've been through this already. If my solemn word is not good enougjh for you, you must know that you can't escape the *Enterprise*. We can follow you anywhere."

"Only if you have something to follow, Captain, and something left to do the following in, and someone to do it."

Kirk gaped at him and tried to unravel the riddle, not liking the way his thoughts were leading him.

On the bridge, Arex heard, and muttered, "I've been getting some unusual sensor readings, Mr. Scott. That planetoid's putting out a lot of noise and all kinds of radiation. But this is different - it's localized around the captain and the alien."

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure - it's not around them," he said excitedly, "it's in *with* them. There's dilithium down there with them."

"Of course," Scott noted. "The Captain took down with him, for the exchange, a -"

"No, no!" The Edoan's voice rose to an abnormal shrillness as his voice-box tried to catch up with his thoughts. "This is different. It appears to be barely stabilized!"

"You've been staring at my pack," the Orion commander was telling Kirk. "I don't wish to keep secrets. It's an explosive device. When triggered by me it will detonate the radioactive

core of this planetoid. The resulting cataclysm will be considerable - quite sufficient to destroy your ship."

"Yours too," Kirk countered. He wasn't familiar with Orion culture, true, but somehow he was sure the expression that slid over the commander's face was his equivalent of a snide smugness.

"Why do you think my people have been able to maintain our operations for so long, so secretly and well, Captain Kirk? It is because all unsuccessful Orion missions end in suicide. When possible, we enjoy company."

"Mr. Scott," Arex half pleaded for a decision, a command, a call to perform - *some*thing.

"We can't warp out, because well lose the captain - and Mr. Spock," Scott thought out loud. He couldn't beam the Orion commander aboard because triggering the device on board would set off the dilithium in the ship's engines. The Orion commander...

"The dilithium!" he shouted, battering at the intercom switch. "Transporter room - Scott here - dilithium crystals on the Orion commander, Kyle, pinpoint 'em and beam 'em up - *fast*!"

"An interesting experience, is it not, Captain?" the Orion was musing, his hand hovering over a switch set into his belt. "Often I've wondered what instant dissolution would feel like. Is there time to feel pain, to sense the coming apart of one's body? An intriguing question."

"Pinpointed, Mr. Scott," Kyle's voice resounded over the open speaker.

"Do it!"

Kyle shifted the proper instrumentation in rapid sequence, his eyes glued to one small dial.

"Ah, well," the Orion commander finished, "it is one thing to philosophize, but another to experience. I have made my peace - let us have reality."

He reached for his belt a second before Kirk leaped at him. Kirk grabbed both alien wrists - too late. The Orion's eyes clenched tight as he winced in anticipation, his finger breaking the trigger contact.

Another second and he found himself flat on the ground. Eyes open again, he discovered to his horror he was still capable of discerning the stars overhead. They formed an irregular halo around the angry face of Kirk, staring down at him.

Kirk was able to relax his grip some, still keeping the Orion pinned to the ground. The alien commander was in shock. He offered little resistance.

"Reality, huh? I'll give you reality." He directed his words to the open communicator. "Scotty, energize."

That brought the Orion awake and kicking. He struggled to reach his own communicator. Kirk jammed a knee into the region of the other man's solar plexus, put pressure on both wrists. The alien slumped, grimacing in pain.

"I know it's not total dissolution," Kirk told him through clenched teeth, "but it's the best I can do - for now." He felt a twinge of vertigo, saw his vision start to fog. Soon the surface of the asteroid was bare of life once more.

Kirk's first sight on coming out of transport was of two burly security guards who stood covering the alcove from opposite angles, phasers drawn and ready. Then he looked back, saw Engineer Scott enter the transporter room. Scott made no attempt to conceal his relief.

The guards immediately took hold of the Orion and effectively immobolized him - though he was still too bewildered to offer much in the way of coherent resistance. While they checked him for weapons somewhat less lethal than planet-busters, Kirk was on his feet, rearranging his tunic and walking toward the waiting Scott.

"Captain," Scott began, emotionally drained, "that was too close. So close that -"

"Take your time, Mr. Scott, and think of something appropriate." He turned, approached the pinioned Orion and his guards. "I'll take that, Ensign," he said to one of the guards, taking the plasic container from his grip. "It's not a weapon."

He moved rapidly to the intercom, the precious cylinder of strobolin ampules now safely in hand. "Kirk to bridge -"

"Captain," Sulu's voice responded, "we heard -"

"Later, Mr. Sulu. Right now I suggest moving us several diameters out in case they decide to try that little trick again."

"Aye, sir!"

"Kirk out." He clicked off, looked back to Scott. "Let's get up to the bridge." Then a glance backward as he addressed the security people. "Bring him along, too." The five men started for the elevator.

"By the way, Scotty, where's the dilithium he packed?"

"Stabilized and on its way to the engine storage chambers, Captain, where it will be put to better use."

On board the Orion pirate, the battle on the bridge raged between confusion and desperation.

"I tell you they're both gone, sir!" the communications officer reported.

"Gone!" The science officer was incredulous.

"I was scanning as ordered, Bhar, when they vanished from the planetoid's surface - both the Earther and the *elt*. There was no warning, and sensors detect nothing like an explosion."

"If it didn't misfire," the exec thought furiously, "then they must have discovered the dilithium pack and disarmed it, somehow."

"*Bhar*, the *Enterprise* is moving. They are leaving the potential radius of destruction."

"Not only have they disarmed it, they know exactly what we intended. That also means that the *elt* has either been killed or captured." He hesitated. "We have one final choice. Contact engineering and tell them to arm the engines to self-destruct."

"We are going to try and ram, *Bhar*?" the communications officer asked questioningly. The first officer was too depressed to frame his reply in contempt.

Instead, he simply repeated what was already known. "They could lose us or destroy us on a whim. But if the *elt* has been killed, or performed *Vyun-pa-shan*, we still have a chance to preserve Orion's neutrality. To prove such a serious accusation they will need more proof than mere tapes can provide. We can at least deny them that."

"Open hailing frequency, Lieutenant," Kirk ordered as he emerged onto the bridge. He took up his position at the command chair while Scott moved to engineering.

The Orion captain was positioned behind the chair where he could see the screen clearly over Kirk - and where he would be in clear range of the screen pickup. Kirk started to sit, noticed a subtle movement out of the corner of his eye. The Orion was moving his arm and hand upward, toward his mouth.

"Stop him."

Both guards reacted instinctively. Each grabbed one of the alien's arms, forced them up and back.

Kirk turned to eye the other closely. The Orion stared stonily at a point beyond Kirk's forehead.

"What are you doing?"

The Orion tried to sound bored. "My cheek itched, Captain. Does it startle you that I might try to scratch it? If you'll direct these idiots to let me go..."

"In a minute," Kirk answered absently. He looked downward, then knelt to pick up a small dark capsule. It was unmarked. He waved it under the other's mouth.

"Do I have to ask what this contains?"

Silence again.

"It *is* poison, isn't it?"

Still no reply. Kirk sighed, resumed his seat and dropped the deadly capsule into the chair-arm disposal unit.

"Commander," he said, carefully considering his words as he lectured the alien, "I'm sure your ship is preparing to destroy itself. Everything you've tried and said so far points to it as the logical course of action.

"If it does, your entire crew will have died for nothing. Because we're not going to let you commit suicide. Whether they live or die, you'll still stand trial. I'm sure both Federation officials and the representatives of other governments will be very interested in the results of the mind scans. I suspect it won't take very many to put a permanent end to Orion's little game of neutral piracy.

"Any reaction, Uhura?"

"I've finally raised them, sir."

Kirk nodded, peered back at his alien counterpart. The expression on that worthy's face was unreadable. Quite possibly it reflected similar emotions to those Kirk felt as he stared upward - hate, and respect.

To some races death meant little. Kirk didn't think it applied to the Orions. This man had meticulously planned his own destruction for the good of his people. Regardless of racial motivation, the key ingredient was still guts. Kirk had to admire them for that.

"They're acknowledging aural exchange only, Captain," Uhura reported.

"That'll do for now, Lieutenant." He spoke into the pickup. "This is Captain Kirk spreaking to the acting commander of the Orion vessel. We hold your commanding officer prisoner." He glanced back at the man in question, then continued.

"He is in excellent health and perfectly capable of communication - voluntary or otherwise. Rest assured he'll remain so." He stopped, spoke more softly to the silent figure behind him.

"Your choice again, sir."

The Orion captain made a resigned gesture with his head. Obviously he had already made up his mind. It confirmed Kirk's belief in the Orion's essential respect for life. He nodded to the security guards.

Both men let the alien go, but continued to watch him closely. Kirk leaned to one side and allowed the other a clear shot at the pickup.

"*Bhar* Cophot?"

Instantly visual contact was established, and Kirk saw the uncertain face of the Orion ship's executive officer staring anxiously back at him.

"*Elt*? Your orders?"

"Disarm the self-destruct system." Kirk noticed he didn't bother to ask if it had been engaged. The exec looked reluctant. "And prepare for formal surrender."

"Very well, *Elt*. Cophot out." The screen went dark - but not before the two aliens had exchanged a complex salute.

Something else impressed Kirk. Despite ample evidence of intricate preparation for self-immolation, both mental and physical, the first officer of the Orion pirate hadn't objected to the surrender order, hadn't argued, hadn't protested.

Having been presented with an unavoidable situation and having exhausted all preferable options, in the end they had

elected to do that which would preserve life - much to Kirk's relief. There was hope for the Orions, it appeared.

Their moral foundation was sound - only the edifice itself was rotten. Once a few reforms had been introduced into their presently one-sided view of interstellar economics, they might prove to be good friends.

Kirk dictated the log entry as he strolled back toward Sick Bay. It was the kind of entry he enjoyed making.

"Captain's log, stardate 5527.4. The Orion privateer crew is in protective custody and their ship in tow. The *Enterprise* is back on course for Deneb five. We -"

No ... no. He ended the entry. There were a host of details he could have added - but to what end? This was one entry that had intruded on an already hectic routine mission. A good place for brevity.

Their appearance at Deneb Five with an Orion vessel in tow would cause enough excitement. And Kirk had little use for fancy entrances. He much preferred a safe exit.

But it would eventually be good for the ship (the ship, the ship - always the ship). The fact that solving an unknown number of disappearances might gain him a promotion never crossed his mind - merely that it might enable them to get a few requisitions filled rather more quickly than Starfleet's sluggish bureaucracy usually managed.

The rewards of heroism, he mused as he turned a corner. Out of such odd things as the illness of one man do great things come.

Orion neutrality would be shown to be as solid as a shoji. The Klingons and Romulans would lose a potentially mischievous ally. And an enormous quadrant of uncertainty on the Federation's fringe would now be opened as safe for shipping, enabling escort vessels and personnel to be shifted to other tasks.

All because of a drug. He wondered how many times in the past the history of whole nations could have been altered by the presence of an aspirin at the right place and time.

He heard the voices even before he entered Sick Bay. Glancing left as he entered, he saw Spock sitting up in bed and looking Vulcan for the first time since they had left Argo. Not atypically, he and the ship's chief medical officer were engaged in a raucous difference of opinion.

"There's no way you can deny it, Spock!" McCoy was shouting.

"I can deny it," Spock countered patiently, "by pointing out..."

McCoy cut him off, rambled - or rather rumbled, on. Sometimes Kirk wondered if they ever argued in complete sentences.

"I've waited a long time for this," McCoy was proclaiming loudly, as Kirk walked up to them, "and you're not going to cheat me out of it."

"Out of what?" Kirk inquired politely. Both Spock and McCoy temporarily turned their attention to him.

"Nothing, Captain. Dr. McCoy is endeavoring to gloat - a reprehensible condition characteristic of his unpredictable prehistoric leanings."

"Spock, that special blood of yours may have saved you a dozen times on other occasions, but this time it almost did you in. You can't deny it, now." The first officer leaned back in the bed and folded his arms.

"On the contrary, Doctor, I still have ample grounds for preferring my physiological structure to yours. As far as psychological structures are concerned, there is of course incontrovertibly no contest."

"I see, gentlemen," Kirk broke in, unable to suppress a smile, "that things are back to normal."

McCoy scowled. "Uh-huh - he's as stubborn as ever, Jim."

"Rational, Doctor," Spock corrected easily.

"Insane, Jim," McCoy shot back.

Sometimes I wonder if anyone on this ship is operating with undamaged circuitry, Kirk mused.

"I am surprised that you raise the question of sanity, Doctor," Spock went on, "as..."

Kirk gave up and walked away. He had had several questions he had wanted to put to Spock. Clearly they would have to wait until McCoy's peculiar brand of rehabilitation therapy concluded.

Meanwhile, at least he had the satisfaction of knowing that both patient and doctor were doing well, thank you....

BEM

(Adapted from a script by David Gerrold)

I

"Captain's log, stardate 5537.3."

Kirk directed his voice toward the log recorder as he settled himself more comfortably in the command chair. "The *Enterprise*, having concluded the Lactran affair and having returned officers Markel, Bryce, and Randolph to Starbase Sixteen Survey Headquarters, is proceeding according to directives on standard survey run." As Kirk shut off the recorder, he decided this mission wasn't *quite* standard.

With all ship's operations functioning smoothly, he was able to lean back and relax slightly. The small portable reader screen set into the left-hand chair arm was playing back an ancient history of Starfleet. Presently the screen displayed the half-legendary story of how one Matthew Jeffries first conceived of the Constitution Class vessels, of which the *Enterprise* was but one of many now.

Fascinating as the tale was, wreathed in myth and the uncertain garb of Terran history, Kirk soon found his mind wandering. He had originally intended to pause at Base 16 and add his own personal observations and comments to the report of the rescued survey team. Instead, he had to settle for submitting the appropriate taped report and excerpts from the ship's log. As usual, the completion of one mission meant that half a dozen more awaited the *Enterprise* in the backlog of Starfleet's central computer network. There were never enough ships, never adequate personnel available to handle the continually growing task of taking some of the mystery from newly discovered worlds.

The Federation's tireless drone probes, immune to fatigue, had recently located several previously unknown and closely packed systems of planets and satellites. These potential colony worlds required the kind of in-depth, and thorough, preliminary study only a major-class starship could provide. So the *Enterprise* was immediately dispatched to carry out routine observations.

At least, the journey would be as routine as one could expect with the opening up of several new worlds—each one filled with a googolplex of new problems and dangers and promises. There would be one other small break in routine—one minor alteration in assigned personnel. An extra, official observer had been added to the roster for the duration of the mission. What made him important was not that he was nonhuman, non-Vulcan, and even nonhumanoid, but that he was a representative of a recently contacted intelligent race.

The orders Kirk had received went on to explain that the Federation was going through a very delicate stage in its relations with the government of Commander Ari bn Bem, of the system of Pandro. The Pandronians had requested that a representative of theirs be permitted to observe a Federation crew carrying out precisely the type of mission the *Enterprise* had just been assigned.

Such simple requests could not be refused. According to his orders, both the Klingons and the Romulans had expressed an interest in deepening their ties with the Pandronians. Every opportunity should be taken to convince the Pandronians that their interests would best be served by a close alliance with the Federation, particularly since several Federation worlds existed in a strategic position relative to Pandro. What all that meant was that Pandro held a position of vital concern to several Federation worlds—but the official phrasing of spatial relationships was more, ah, realistic.

Federation DIPS—members of the Diplomatic Psychology Corps—were convinced that the Federation was gaining the upper hand in the battle for Pandronian influence—a battle that had to be augmented by the cooperation and aid of everyone in Starfleet. Captain Kirk was therefore directed to extend to Commander bn Bem all courtesies normally extended to an attached observer, with special regard for the precarious diplomatic situation, keeping in mind the need to . . .

Et cetera, et cetera.

Well, Kirk had it in mind, all right! The matter had been foremost in his mind since that always underfoot, irritating, and occasionally downright rude Pandronian had come aboard. Unless something happened to change their visitor's

attitude, Kirk feared that Federation-Pandronian relations could be severely damaged. He was also afraid that Commander bn Bem might be severely damaged. The list of angry complaints from insulted or challenged or otherwise provoked crew members was approaching critical mass.

He managed to shove the problem from his thoughts as he added a short entry to the log. The view now on the main screen—a handsome world of swirling white clouds and blue ocean—did much to blank out all thoughts of their obstreperous visitor.

"Captain's log, stardate 5537.3. We are taking up orbit around Delta Theta Three, a newly charted Class M planet—the last world on our current mission. The original drone scout reported the possible presence of aboriginal life forms on Delta Theta Three, life forms of undetermined intelligence and accomplishment.

"Upon entering orbit the *Enterprise* will proceed to carry out standard survey procedures and investigation, placing particular emphasis on a detailed study of the local sapient life form."

Kirk clicked off the machine as he rose, heading for the turbolift. The presence of even a marginally intelligent life form would be a most welcome conclusion to this expedition, which had been remarkable only for the mediocrity and unattractiveness of the worlds they had examined thus far.

And then there was the remarkable unattractiveness of the singularly trying Commander bn Bem. The Pandronian was one guest Kirk would be glad to be rid of. As he rode the lift toward the Transporter Room, he broke out in a satisfied smile at the thought of the moment when Commander bn Bem would be officially returned to the Pandronian mission at Starbase 13.

He came upon the rest of the initial landing party in the corridor leading to the Transporter Room—Sulu, and Spock, with Scott accompanying them.

"Anything new on your potential hosts, Captain?" Scott called to him.

"Sensors have located several possible groupings of aborigines, Scotty," Kirk informed them. "The xenologists are

sure of one thing—Delta Theta Three isn't another world of superminds like Lactra. The natives here are definitely primitive. Bear in mind, gentlemen, that like all primitive peoples they may tend to spear first and think later. I want everyone to keep in mind that no unnecessary risks are to be taken, no matter how important the information in question." He indicated the compact, cylindrical instruments each man held.

"These monitoring devices have to be hand-planted close to a center of local activity, if we're going to get any long-term data on these people. That accomplished, we'll beam up. Study of flora and fauna, geological features, and the like can be best accomplished by specialized teams afterwards.

"Lieutenant Uhura will be tracking us throughout, and Mr. Kyle will be standing by." Chief Engineer Scott nodded reassuringly. "If there is trouble of any kind, beam up immediately. Don't try to be a hero, and don't place intelligence gathering above your own life." This last comment was directed, as usual, at Spock, who, as usual, took no notice.

As the door sensed their approach, it slid aside, admitting them to the Transporter Room. Entering, they started toward the transporter alcove—and froze. Chief Kyle was present, but not in his accustomed position behind the console. Instead, he stood to one side, uncertainly eyeing the creature who occupied his station. At the entrance of the captain and his companions, Kyle turned and threw Kirk a helpless look.

Kirk nodded once as he turned his attention to the console. The biped who stood behind it, fiddling with every control in reach, was more or less of human size. Resemblance to anything manlike faded rapidly after that. The creature was bulky, blue, and hirsute—all three characteristics amply apparent despite the concealing full-length uniform it wore. The interloper had also noted the entrance of the four officers and turned to bestow the toothy equivalent of a Pandronian grin on an unamused Kirk.

"Ah, Kirk Captain," he rumbled in a voice like a contrabassoon full of marbles, "welcome and greeting. Settings are almost complete."

For the moment Kirk elected to ignore the Pandronian's unauthorized manipulation of the transporter controls. And there was no reason to reprimand Kyle, who had only been following the orders regarding bn Bem. As honorary Federation commander, the visiting Pandronian had free run of the cruiser. The mounting stack of complaints back in Kirk's office attested to the extent to which bn Bem had exercised his privileges.

Ordered to stand aside by a "superior" officer, Kyle had done so. The transporter engineer would have his chance to report on this incident later. At the moment, it was the Pandronian's presence which concerned Kirk most.

"Commander bn Bem, exactly what are you doing here? I thought you would be down in Sciences, studying procedure as information on the world below is gathered."

bn Bem replied readily in the highly contemptuous manner which perfectly complemented his personality. It was almost, Kirk reflected, as if the Pandronian were granting them a gigantic favor by deigning to grace the *Enterprise* with his presence. "This One," bn Bem sneered, "has decided to accompany contact team for observation of Delta Theta surface."

Kirk ignored the tone of the envoy's voice. He had learned these past days to tune it out. Nevertheless, he couldn't keep all trace of irritation from his reply. "Commander bn Bem," he reminded the other with as much control as he could muster, "you were assigned to this ship in an 'attached observer' status. Yet you've spent the past several planetary circumnavigations holed up in your quarters—when you weren't intruding for 'observation' into the private quarters of my crew. You haven't made anything like a detailed study of our survey methods—until now, it seems, when we are about to deal with a world that may very well sport a hostile primitive culture."

bn Bem's answer took the form of a controlled, basso chirp, made softly, but just loud enough for Kirk and the others to hear. "Patience . . . every planet is dangerous to the ignorant." Now speaking in a normal conversational tone, he resumed. "This One has decided that the nexus is now. Must now observe workings of starship and crew. This One is not

impressed by outside recommendations for study time. A teacher is not instructed by students."

"You've had ample opportunity to 'observe workings' both on board and on-surface during our last several planetfalls—at all times in comparative safety. This beam-down is not for the casual observer, especially one as diplomatically sensitive as you know you are. It could be hazardous and—"

"I am prepared," bn Bem countered simply.

Kirk started to say something, turned, then muttered to his first officer. "Mr. Spock, I don't like this at all. Diplomatic relations could be endangered if anything happens to this—this—to Commander bn Bem while he's our guest."

"It is not merely political considerations that dictate our actions, Captain," Spock reminded him, "There is the fact that the Pandronians are also very advanced in certain exotic areas of medicine and biology. There is much we can learn from them—much that Starfleet would rather we learned than the Klingons, say. And remember—orders expressly stated that Commander bn Bem be given anything he requested."

"Within reason," Kirk added. "But I don't think this request to join the landing party is reasonable."

"Starfleet may feel otherwise."

Kirk started to offer further objection, but found Spock's reminder inarguable. He let out a frustrated, heartfelt sigh and turned back to their guest. He'd make one last try.

"Commander bn Bem, this is not going to be a pleasure excursion. I really cannot, in clear conscience, permit you to beam down to this planet with us. You understand my position, I'm sure."

"Understanding it is," bn Bem replied, "but dirty conscience if required. This One is adamant and bystanding to accompany on landing."

Kirk growled back, wondering at the Pandronian's perverse preferences. "This is an odd time to be adamant."

There wasn't much Kirk could do about it, except say no—and that could undo all the courtesy they had so painfully extended to bn Bem thus far. "All right," he finally grumbled, "let's go. There's a world waiting for us." He stomped toward the transporter alcove.

"Scotty, if you'll set—"

bn Bem interrupted him even as the chief engineer was moving to the console, bn Bem was an accomplished interrupter. "Waste not the time. This One has already controls set, Mr. Scotty."

"Mr. Scotty" eyed the Pandronian distrustfully and proceeded to make an elaborate, overthorough inspection of the settings in question. Hard squints and florid gestures notwithstanding, he was finally compelled to look toward the alcove and nod slowly.

"Everythin' appears to be okay, Captain," he announced. "The coordinates are locked in on the preselected touchdown site, and everythin' else looks proper."

bn Bem let out a snort of satisfaction, which no one could fail to hear—least of all Scott—before taking his place in the alcove next to Kirk, Spock, and Sulu. "Time waste," he muttered disgustedly. His human companions resolutely ignored him.

They were joined a moment later by Scott as Kyle assumed the position behind the transporter console. Kirk checked to make certain everyone still held the important automatic monitoring devices, then nodded toward the console.

"Energize, Chief."

The room faded around them . . .

Delta Theta Three was a name devoid of planetary personality, but the little group was soon to discover the world so designated was well equipped with same.

All at once five roughly cylindrical forms of glowing particles appeared near the shore of a lake and commenced to coalesce.

The lake itself was covered with brown scum and riotous blue growths, shading in color almost to black in places. Equally bloated vegetation thrived in the swampy region draining into the lake. A meandering stream entered the lake to the right of the rapidly solidifying figures, the water drifting with infinite slowness. Black and brown cypresslike trees, long creepers, and twisting vines occupied much of the open space between the larger boles. But despite the luxuriant growth,

there was an absence of grass and ground cover, giving the jungle an underlying appearance of desolation.

The few open, meadowed spaces were muddy and unwholesome-looking. In contrast to the somewhat ominous landscape, the cries of innumerable tiny climbers and other hidden creatures sounded merrily from within the thickly overgrown areas.

The five cylinder-shapes became more distinct, added detail and resolution, and turned into the five explorers transported from the *Enterprise*. Something caused a split-second delay in the final transformation of each figure. Scott resolved first, stumbling slightly as he did so on the soft, sloping shoreline. Sulu appeared next to him, stumbling awkwardly enough to fall momentarily to his knees.

bn Bem was next. The Pandronian actually materialized a full meter above the shore, which did not affect him as the slight difference had affected Scott and Sulu. His legs instinctively extended the additional meter to allow him a gentle setdown. Once established on the ground, those elastic limbs retracted to their normal length. No one saw the startling adaptation take place.

Kirk and Spock completed the arrival of the landing party. They rematerialized at a similar distance above the water. Having neither extendable legs, nor wings, the two looked both confused and stunned as they dropped, making a pair of undignified splashes. Fortunately the water was only chest deep.

As the only one of the arrivals with a sound footing on land, bn Bem rushed into the water to aid the struggling Kirk and Spock in regaining their footing. Kirk had already suspected their guest of having a many-layered personality, but a multilayered torso was something no one could have anticipated.

The Pandronians were a *very* new race to Federation biologists. Consequently, neither the captain, nor the rapidly righting Spock—much less Sulu or Scott—took note that under the murky surface Commander bn Bem's lower half detached itself from his upper torso with all the ease and naturalness of a shuttle leaving the *Enterprise*'s hanger.

While the creature's upper half made arm motions to aid the floundering Kirk, the lower half swam busily around behind the captain and proceeded to remove his phaser and communicator. These devices were immediately and efficiently replaced with well-made copies. Then the substitution was carried out on Spock.

Above, bn Bem—half of him, anyway—entended an arm as Kirk regained his balance. "Assistance is offered," he said, with barely concealed distaste.

Kirk and his first officer exchanged glances, then Kirk looked back at their guest. "Thanks just the same, Commander. We'll manage."

bn Bem imitated a human shrug, one of his newly acquired gestures. "As you choose." As he turned to leave the water, his lower half reattached itself to the upper. It was an intact and familiar Pandronian who emerged from the lake.

Kirk and Spock struggled out of the plant-choked stagnant water, both completely unaware that anything untoward had taken place. If they had felt a slight twinge or two, they might have looked more closely at the slight bulges in the Pandronian's sample pouch, dangling loosely from one hip. The pouch looked full, which was odd if one considered they hadn't been here long enough to do much sampling.

Kirk choked back the thousand or so suggestions that sprang immediately to the tip of his tongue and contented himself with saying, "In the future, Commander bn Bem, you will leave the operation of the transporter to Mr. Scott, Mr. Kyle, or one of the regular members of the transporter crew."

"Is response to offer of aid," bn Bem murmured. "Typical." He seemed ready to add a few additional choice observations, but was interrupted himself for a change.

"Captain!"

Kirk looked at the anxious expression on his chief engineer's face. "What's the matter, Scotty?" He shook water from his arms and began stripping the clinging water plants from his tunic, hoping that soggy mess didn't contain anything likely to bite, cut, or otherwise make a nuisance of itself at some future date.

"Maybe nothing, Captain," Scott replied, "but Lieutenant Uhura reports some very unusual activity in our general vicinity."

Wonderful! They had barely touched down, and already they'd gotten drenched to the skin and were now confronted with something else unexpected. He took a couple of steps and hefted the open communicator.

"What kind of activity, Lieutenant?"

Uhura spoke from her position as commander-in-charge, leaning forward toward the con pickup. "Lieutenant Arex has been tracking what appears to be a mobile nonnetwork sensory stasis. It's still very small," she added after looking for confirmation to Arex seated at Navigation, "and it's several thousand kilometers west of your present position."

Kirk frowned. "Say again, Lieutenant?"

Uhura's voice was only slightly distorted, thanks to the ever efficient communicator. "It resembles a ship's sensor field, but there's nothing detectable like a scanning grid or other central point of reference."

Kirk digested this information, his concern mitigated by the distance involved. "You said it was mobile, Lieutenant. How mobile?"

"Lieutenant Arex speaking, sir," came the Edoan navigator's crisp tones. "Brownian movement only—no discernible direction and no hint of a guiding force."

"Most odd," Spock commented from nearby. "The implication is that there is something else on this world beyond aborigines. One would have to suspect something intelligent, yet nothing of the kind was reported in the initial survey." He shook his head. "It hardly seems likely the probes would have missed something we have detected so soon after arrival."

Kirk decided to ignore the implication, for the present. As long as whatever it was presented no immediate threat, they would concentrate on the task at hand. But he could no more stifle his curiosity than could Spock.

"It might be a very low-lying atmospheric anomaly, Mr. Spock. We've encountered other climatic phenomena before which have superficially resembled the activities of something

sentient. And keep in mind that a drone probe isn't the most exacting observer. Detailed examination of a world is our business."

"None of which I had forgotten, Captain, and all of which I agree with."

Kirk turned back to the communicator. "Keep monitoring, Lieutenant Uhura. As a precaution only, put the ship on yellow alert. We'll continue the survey and monitor-emplacement mission for now, but notify us immediately if there is any change in the situation. An increase in the intensity of the field, a change of speed or direction, and especially anything that might indicate the field is under the control of intelligence—anything which hints that this might be other than a natural phenomenon. Kirk out."

He closed the communicator, breaking transmission, and handed it back to Scott, then indicated a path through the swampy meadows. "According to the computer plotting, the nearest life-form concentration—presumably the nearest native village—is this way. Let's get on with it."

Footing near the lake ranged "from the oleaginous to the obfuscatory," as Spock pointed out. That remark prompted Scott to redefine it in less precise but more colorful terms.*

*Transcriber's note: Ethnic highland terminology omitted here by curator's directive.

The ground they encountered was messy, but not dangerous. There were no quicksands or sandpits. After some hard slogging, they found themselves moving through the forest and meadows with confidence, if not comfort.

"The rain-forest ecology is particularly interesting here," Spock commented absorbedly. "Life on this planet appears to be geologically younger than one would expect, given the age of this star and—"

A familiar voice interrupted, almost on cue. "Now urgent." bn Bem was studying his own tricorder. "Announce: This One is picking up readings which indicate a large group of intelligent-maybes life forms directly ahead."

Kirk held up a hand and called for a halt. "All right. We must take care not to be seen. Part of the prime directive—Hey!"

Commander bn Bem, ignoring all instructions and precautions, took off at high speed toward the hypothesized aborigines.

"Commander bn Bem, come back!" Kirk shouted. He started off after the retreating figure. "Scotty, Sulu—stay here."

"But, Captain—" Scott began.

Kirk cut him off curtly. "Orders, Scotty. Stand by. Come on, Spock." They both broke into a run in pursuit of the galloping Pandronian.

Their bulky guest appeared to be slowing as they crossed a swampy meadow. He vanished into a clump of tightly packed black trunks laced with interweaving vines.

"He won't get far in there," Spock commented with satisfaction.

Kirk's reply was tense. "I hope not—for his own sake, as well as ours."

They headed for the dense thicket. Spock's estimate was reasonable as far as it went, but it did not go far enough to include a Pandronian.

bn Bem came up against a veritable dead end, a place where the small trees grew so close together that no one his size could possibly squeeze through. So the commander split into three parts, each of which was small enough to ooze through any of several openings in the wall of wood. Once successfully past the barrier the tripartite alien promptly reassembled himself and continued blithely on his composite way.

Unfortunately, neither Kirk nor Spock was capable of such bodily diffusion, nor was either aware that their recalcitrant guest was. They came to the same dead end, only in their case the description was fitting and final.

"He's gone," Kirk exclaimed, spinning to search every crevice, each potential hiding place.

But Spock continued to stare in disbelief straight ahead. "He could not have reversed his direction and slipped past us. To escape he had to go through here."

"That's impossible, Spock," Kirk said confidently, turning. "There's no way—" He stopped, moved to a gap in the trees

the size of his chest, and stared through. He got only a brief glimpse of a blue bipedal figure disappearing into the distance. But unless this world was inhabited by blue, two-legged aborigines, Kirk had a pretty good idea who it was.

"There he is, all right." He frowned. "I don't know how he got through, but get through he did." Kirk took hold of the smallest trunk bordering the gap, got a good grip with both hands, braced himself, and gave a mighty heave. The tree moved about as much as one of the *Enterprise*'s warp-drive engines would under similar circumstances.

"Come on, Spock, we'll have to go around."

They began to circle the dense grove of saplings and vines, well aware that bn Bem could be far ahead by the time they found a way. Something else was puzzling Kirk.

"That Pandronian's actions just don't make sense. Never mind for the moment how he got through that tight space. Right now I'd like to know *why* he did it. No sense, none at all."

"His actions might make sense to another Pandronian, Captain," the always pragmatic Spock suggested.

"I suppose so," Kirk confessed. "I've got to admit that one thing I've never found it easy to understand are the motivations of another species."

"Indeed?" exclaimed his first officer, with an inflection that indicated there was something more to his remark.

They detoured until they reached a section of the closely bunched trees which was penetrable. The forest closed in around them, shutting out the meadow and nearly doing likewise to the sun. As it turned out, the intertwined trunks were a disguised blessing, for the surface here was too soft and deep to permit rapid walking. They made much better time through the branches.

"I believe that is the direction, Captain," Spock said finally, when the trees showed signs of thinning. "Or possibly it was more to the left. Or perhaps—"

"We've lost him," Kirk finished succinctly. He was studying the small open area ahead, equally uncertain which way to go, when he heard a low murmur off to their left.

"That way—something over there."

Some frenetic crawling and running brought them to a wide clearing. They were about to move out into the open by jumping a fallen log when each man's hand went to his companion's shoulder and the two dropped down behind it.

They had seen the movement simultaneously.

"It would appear to be a native food-gathering party," Spock ventured, peering at the still-distant, slow-moving forms.

"Yes," agreed Kirk, "and part of the food they've gathered is Commander bn Bem."

At this distance it was difficult to obtain an accurate picture of the aborigines, but they appeared to stand just under an impressive three meters in height. Their skin was bright red; the overall impression was of reptilian, dull-witted, and probably belligerent creatures.

Commander bn Bem stood in their midst, looking decidedly unhappy. For the moment his usual haughtiness and air of self-satisfaction was completely absent

Equally anxious minds studied the situation from more comfortable and more remote surroundings. Strange information was coming through on the *Enterprise*'s instruments. "Lieutenant Uhura," Arex finally declared, "I'm picking up mounting activity on the surface. Initial indications point to an expansion of the still unidentified sensory anomaly."

Uhura nodded, glanced backwards. "Lieutenant M'ress, contact the landing party."

"Aye, aye, Lieutenant."

Scott's gaze shifted from the placid surface of the vegatation-choked lake to his communicator as it buzzed urgently.

"Scott here."

"Mr. Scott, where's the captain?"

"He's separated from us. Commander bn Bem ran off into the forest and—"

"Ran off into the forest?" came Uhura's startled echo.

"Yes. I know it's undiplomatic of me, but I say good riddance. However, the captain's not in a position to do so. He's responsible for that hairy—Anyway, he and Mr. Spock took off after our Pandronian charge. They're out in the brush somewhere. Sulu and I were ordered to remain here." He looked into the trees, staring in the direction the two senior officers had taken too many minutes ago.

"That was a while ago, and it doesn't look very friendly down here." He chewed his lower lip. "Have you tried contacting them directly since they disappeared?"

"Yes, we have. Neither the captain nor Mr. Spock acknowledges his communicator. Nor," Uhura added, "do they show up on the scanning grid. We can detect only one energy source, and it hasn't moved. That would be you and Sulu.

"It's their absence on the grid that really worries me, Commander Scott. The silence almost screams that their communicator responders have been disconnected. Also, we're picking up increased sensory activity."

"The large anomaly?"

"Yes. Nothing threatening. At least, it's as unthreatening as something that big and inexplicable can be." Her voice turned firm. "You're certain Mr. Spock went with the captain?"

"Aye, Lieutenant."

Her voice faded slightly as she apparently addressed someone on the bridge. Scott heard the order faintly. "Lieutenant Arex, initiate a detailed sensor scan for the captain and Mr. Spock, using Commander Scott's communicator pack as a center point." She directed her words to the pickup again.

"Landing party, prepare to beam up."

"Lieutenant Uhura," Scott countered, "Sulu and I could track down the captain and Mr. Spock from here."

"I'm sorry, Commander Scott," she replied. "You know standard procedure in a case like this—better than I do, I suspect. We've had no response from the missing men. We can't take additional chances without further information on their whereabouts and/or condition."

"We are talking about the *captain*," Scott fumed.

Uhura's voice rose, strained. "I know that, Commander." There was a pause, and when she spoke again her tone was quieter, though no less strained. "We have to follow orders, and regulations. An unresolved situation of this type on a new world, involving an unknown race of still indeterminate potential—and then there's that anomaly. No . . . stand by to beam up, Mr. Scott."

The chief engineer started to reply again. He outranked Uhura, but she was officially in charge as long as he remained on the surface. Besides, she made sense.

"Standing by," he told her tightly. "And—my apologies, lassie. You're right, of course."

If Uhura responded, he didn't hear it, because a faint fog was beginning to obscure vision and perception. The chief became a cluster of chromatically colored particle-wave energy, as did Sulu. The cluster faded, disappeared.

Nothing moved on the shore of the halcyon lake save a few small beetlelike things and one curious quasi lizard, whose attention had been momentarily focused on the incomprehensible apparitions. They were gone now and the creature's blank gaze turned back to the beetles. They were much more interesting, and comprehensible.

"We could rush them, Spock," Kirk surmised as he studied the size and number of aborigines surrounding the captive bn Bem, "but someone might get hurt. I'd rather it wasn't any of them, and I darn sure won't let it be one of us. Their weapons may be crude, but they're effective." He thought a moment. "Maybe we can do it the easy way, simply beam him and then ourselves out of here."

"A facile solution, Captain," concurred Spock.

Kirk brought out his communicator, flipped it open. "Kirk to *Enterprise* . . . Kirk to *Enterprise*."

Silence. He looked down at the compact instrument, listened hard. Even the barely audible low hum which indicated proper activation was absent. Carefully Kirk closed the top, then opened it again. "Kirk to *Enterprise*."

No hum, no reply—so he then began staring at the device. His particular personal communicator had been in his

possession for some time. Only . . . this wasn't it.

A glance over at Spock showed that his first officer was examining his own communicator.

"This isn't my communicator, Spock. I know every scratch and smudge on it, and they're all missing from this one."

"Nor is this one mine, Captain," the first officer replied evenly. "Not only is it not mine, it is not anyone's. These are not Federation communicators but clever forgeries. Very clever forgeries." He hefted his experimentally. "Even the weight is correct, though I venture to say they contain anything but operative electronics."

"But it's not possible," Kirk objected dazedly. "This communicator's been with me since we beamed . . . What now?"

Spock had his phaser out and tried it experimentally. "Our weapons are also substitutes." For confirmation Kirk attempted to rattle a small sapling with his own phaser. Not so much as a leaf was disturbed.

"So our phasers and communicators have been swapped for phonies, Commander bn Bem has run off and gotten himself taken captive by the local primitives, and we've been separated from Scott and Sulu." It was the captain's turn to hike a rarely raised eyebrow. "Mr. Spock, something mighty funny is going on."

His first officer nodded somberly. "I would put it in less colloquial terms, but that is certainly an accurate appraisal of our present circumstances. It would appear that a course of action other than what we originally planned is advisable, until we can discover what is happening, and why."

"Agreed, Spock—except for one thing." He looked back across the log, keeping his profile low. "Commander bn Bem's difficulty seems genuine. Phasers or not, we have to rescue him. If he should be killed while under Federation protection, not to mention ours . . ." The sentence trailed off unfinished.

"Hold it—they're moving."

Both officers watched as the natives began to move off to the west, picking their way easily through the muddy meadows and swampland. Commander bn Bem hiked along

readily, making no attempt to slow his captors' progress or leave a trail for would-be rescuers to follow.

Kirk was suddenly struck by the Pandronian's curiously complaisant attitude. "He doesn't act like someone on the verge of being dissected by alien aborigines."

"There's not a great deal he can do, in his present circumstances," Spock suggested.

"I don't buy that, Spock. He ought to be making it difficult for them—struggling, making noise, anything to delay his removal from here. Especially knowing that we were chasing after him. The motives—"

"—of a Pandronian are unknown to us," finished Spock. "In any case, we are badly outnumbered—not to mention being unarmed. We might return to contact Mr. Scott and Lieutenant Sulu. Hopefully *their* phasers and communicators are in working order."

Kirk shook his head. "Can't risk it, Spock. The group is moving. We might never be able to find them again in time to save bn Bem, not in this swamp. And if Scotty's and Sulu's equipment also turned out to be fakes—no, at least now we have the commander in sight.

"Let's stick with them. As long as we stay under cover, we have a chance to surprise them."

Careful and occasionally treacherous pursuit brought them unseen to a vantage point slightly above the natives' destination: a small but neatly arranged village. Several large wooden cages, empty now, reposed at its center. The convoy appeared to be in the process of installing Commander bn Bem in one of the cages.

The thatched huts comprising the village looked competent enough. They were in no way spectacular, not even for primitive architecture. Little in the way of drying sheds, baskets, pottery, or other tools and constructions was visible in the small community. There was nothing to indicate to Kirk that these aliens ranked in the forefront of known primitive races. Spock was obviously dwelling on the same thought.

"These aborigines appear to be in a late primitive state, below urban tribal infrastructure but far above mere nomadic hunters and gatherers. Based on what we have seen thus far,

one can deduce that they are at least moderately intelligent and possess a basic language and well-developed social structure. I would assume that a well-developed system of morals, taboos, and traditions is present in the appropriate proportions and degrees of advancement."

He paused, considered a moment before adding, "The standard method of dealing with strangers in such societies may include dismemberment, consumption, or various other unfriendly actions we cannot imagine." He directed a nod toward the now tightly imprisoned Commander bn Bem.

"Judging from the way they have treated the commander so far, I believe we can safely discard such hopeful possibilities as the commander being treated as a god from the sky, or being adopted into the tribe."

"That's too bad," Kirk murmured. "I think he belongs, somehow. But I agree, Spock." Once again he found himself puzzled by the Pandronian's nonchalant attitude, bn Bem stood calmly in the center of the wooden cage, not pacing or testing the bars or imploring his captors.

"You'd think Commander bn Bem would be able to look at these people and see the same things, yet he's given no indication he finds capture and confinement especially objectionable. If anything, he's behaving as if he's half enjoying it." Kirk shrugged, resigned.

"Well, maybe this is the standard Pandronian way of reacting to capture. As you've pointed out, Spock, we know so little about them." He slid down behind the rotting log in front of them.

"In any case, we can't do anything for him before nightfall. I just hope these aborigines' night vision isn't as well developed as their biceps."

The time remaining until dusk wasn't passed in idleness. Studious searching through the underbrush around the little rise they had encamped on turned up several broken but unrotted sections of tree. These would serve as clubs. A few fist-sized stones coupled with some lengths of native creeper and a little dexterous Vulcan handwork produced a set of efficient-looking bolos.

Thus armed, they waited until the sun had vanished behind the trees in the abrupt manner common to all jungles, before proceeding cautiously down the slope toward the village clearing. Civilization here hadn't reached the elevated plane of intertribal warfare, so Kirk and Spock encountered no posted guards as they entered the outskirts of the village.

Once, something like a cross between a cat and a chartreuse sofa crossed their path. It stared at them with startled red eyes, uttered a single soft yelp like a warped tape, and waddled rapidly out of sight. None of the natives were about. Occasional muffled sounds drifted out from various huts.

"Shhh," Kirk whispered.

"Of course," Spock agreed in near-normal conversational tone. Kirk threw him an exasperated look.

Several moons—one globular, two others of irregular cast—lit the village in ghost light. Eight shapes—the two men and their shadows—moved toward the central cage.

bn Bem noticed their approach and had the grace not to cry out. Silently, Kirk and Spock set to work on the lashings of the case door.

"Kirk Captain—?"

"Shut up," Kirk ordered, scraping fingers on the crude fiber of the bindings. "We're rescuing you."

"You are interfering with observations."

Even Spock was startled. "*This* is how you observe? By being captured?"

"The opportunities for first-member study are best."

"Assuming the studied don't decide to do a little vivisecting of their own," the first officer observed.

bn Bem adopted a pose of contempt "Is as *logical* a way as any, Spock Commander."

"Maybe so," put in Kirk, "but I don't think Starfleet would approve. You're being rescued, Commander, whether you like it or not. Come on."

The lashings finally undone, Kirk yanked the door aside. For a minute, as bn Bem stood stolidly in the middle of the cage, the captain was afraid the Pandronian was actually going to

resist the rescue. But he finally left the confines of the wooden bars, muttering to himself, using some of the logic he professed to have.

They started for the hill, but were confronted by the unexpected appearance of a light. It did not come from any of the orbiting satellites above. It was small, intense, and wavered slightly.

A second light joined it, then another, and still more. Each light lit a semihumanoid reptilian face, staring into the night. The torches formed a circle around the men. In the flickering light the aborigines' skin took on an ominous blood-red hue.

Kirk took a step backward. As he considered running for it, there was a faint blur before him and something went *ka-thunk* at their feet.

Looking down, he saw the quivering length of a rough-hewn but deadly-looking spear. As a nonverbal means of interspecies communication, it was brutally effective.

"Gentlemen," Kirk observed as the circle of torch-bearers moved closer, "I think we're trapped."

"Ineluctably," Spock murmured.

None of them got much sleep the rest of that night, due in large part to the steady noise of saplings being felled around the village and to the steady rumble of their own thoughts. Only Commander bn Bem seemed composed as he studied the native activity.

"Why, Kirk Captain," he exclaimed once, "you are not *observing*."

Kirk thought a few choice thoughts and ignored the Pandronian's sneers. A steady stream of most undiplomatic images eventually lulled him to sleep.

II

When the sun rose again, Commander bn Bem was back in his cage. The village was unchanged, except that the commander now had company. Two cages to his left were also occupied. One imprisoned Kirk; the other held his first officer. A single native guard stood close by, the villagers undoubtedly having decided one was required should any more of the evil strangers suddenly appear.

Kirk had spent futile hours in the predawn darkness testing the lianas which held his cage door closed. But while the aborigines were primitive, they were not stupid. The new knots were far too solid and complex for Kirk to unravel.

A small knife would probably have been enough to saw through the woody lashings. But he didn't have a small knife. Instead, he had a phaser which could carbonize the entire village in a couple of minutes. Only *this* phaser was a fake. It wouldn't incinerate a *Starfleet Technical Manual*.

Kirk doubted that the natives, however lethargic they might otherwise appear concerning their captives, would give him time to gnaw through the bindings with his teeth. He wished he had the tech manual now, anyway. At least it would give him something to read.

Instead, he had to be satisfied with standing morosely at the front of the cage, eyeing the massive guard and muttering to himself.

"How's that, Captain?" Spock queried, overhearing a portion of Kirk's ramblings.

"I was wondering how come we always end up like this, Mr. Spock."

"I assume that's a rhetorical question, Captain."

Kirk sighed, pulled his arms free of the supportive crossbar, and stared through the poles at his first officer. "I was just expressing my astonishment at our ability to get into these situations."

"The common complaint of every human since the dawn of time, I believe," Spock commented philosophically. "It's fate, Captain," he murmured.

Kirk looked surprised. "Fate, Mr. Spock?"

"I think that is the correct term," his first officer said, looking curious rather than uncertain.

Apparently stirred by this incomprehensible alien gabble, the guard strode over to Kirk's cage and poked at the captain with his spear. Kirk jumped back.

"Well, I'm not going to rely on fate to get us out of here." He eyed the guard, who stared back unimpressed. Then Kirk turned a significant expression on Spock.

"Why don't you coax him over to your cage and try a quick Vulcan nerve pinch, Mr. Spock?"

Spock eyed the aborigine warily as the enormous biped turned a neolithic gaze on him. "Captain, I'm *only* a Vulcan. There are limits to what even I can do. It is possible that I could surprise this creature. I could also fail. For one thing, I am unfamiliar with its internal physiology and, specifically, its neural network. Should I guess wrong, it might irritate the creature. I do not believe being taken apart by an aroused native would enhance your own chances of escape, while mine would no longer be in question. Logically, therefore . . ." He shrugged.

Kirk turned his attention back to Commander bn Bem, who had been mercifully silent all morning. "I'm afraid this means we're not going to be able to rescue you at this time, Commander."

His sarcasm was lost on the naturally sarcastic bn Bem. "Good intentions, Captain, are not enough. Planet Pandro will be much displeased. Starfleet Federation told us you were best captain in the fleet. Actions to date deny this."

Kirk had finally had enough. To hell with diplomacy. "Commander bn Bem," he yelled, "you are personally responsible for our present situation!

"You deliberately disobeyed orders, orders given for your own good, by running off. Your attitude during this entire mission has been extremely abrasive. And I don't know how you did it," he continued dangerously, "but I'm convinced now

that you're the one who switched our phasers and communicators for imitations."

"You place too much dependence, Kirk Captain, on phasers and communicators." If Kirk's accusations had dented the Pandronian's insufferable egotism, he gave no sign of it. "Petty instruments. One should rely more on personal resources instead of artificialities."

"Either one of those 'artificialities' could solve our problems right now," grumbled Kirk.

"Is that all?" bn Bem sneered contemptuously. He reached into the pouch at his waist—and produced both phasers and communicators.

"Our phasers!" Kirk exclaimed excitedly. "Throw one—" His excitement was abruptly tempered by realization of what the magical appearance of their devices meant.

"Commander bn Bem," he began carefully, "if you've had those phasers and communicators all this time, why didn't you use them to escape?"

The Pandronian's attitude was that of a parent patiently lecturing a couple of dull-witted children. "You recall will, Kirk Captain, my say that this is best way to observe. As observation is completed, is now time to leave. This One, though, does not demean self by the use of casual violence to accomplish simple goals."

"Oh." Kirk wasn't sure whether he was more fascinated than furious.

"However," the commander concluded, "you may demean yourselves if you wish."

"If we *wish*? Commander bn Bem, I want those phasers and communicators *now*—and for O'Morion's sake, toss them over carefully. They're pretty rugged, but—"

bn Bem waved him off. "Compliance with request is, but is no need to throw. This One must disassemble."

Kirk stared blankly at the Pandronian, the commander's words echoing meaninglessly in his mind, until bn Bem showed what he meant

Detaching his lower half, the commander split neatly in two and squeezed out through the gaps in the bars, his top half

carrying phasers and communicators easily.

Kirk gawked, fascinated, while Spock murmured, "Remarkable." The Pandronian reassembled and handed each of them their instruments. "Truly remarkable. Commander bn Bem is a colony creature. Or perhaps we should begin calling him Commanders bn Bem."

"Commander," Kirk wondered, leaving aside for the moment the question of whether the Pandronian should be addressed in the singular or plural, "if you could split yourself into separate sections, why didn't you escape on your own earlier?"

He set his phaser on low stun and beamed the guard. The huge native slumped, unconscious, on his supporting spear. A careful readjustment of the setting wheel and Kirk was burning away the lashings on his cage, as Spock did likewise to his.

bn Bem watched their efforts idly and continued in the same lecturing tone. "I explained, was not concluded with observating. Also, would deny you the chance to prove your people's value to planet Pandro by rescuing This One from possibly dangerous situation to same."

"For the last time, Commander bn Bem," Kirk declaimed in exasperation, "this is not a laboratory. Not for testing the locals, not for testing us. This is a new, hostile world. And," he added forcefully, "Mr. Spock and I are not your private experimental animals."

"I did not say that," bn Bem objected mildly.

"But you implied it." The Pandronian did not reply. "I have no choice this time," Kirk went on. "Commander, consider yourself under protective custody. We're going to protect you from any further escapades. Mr. Spock, keep an eye on him while I call in. On *all* of him." He flipped open his communicator.

"Kirk to *Enterprise*, Kirk to *Enterprise* . . ."

From his position at the con, Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott leaned forward toward the communications console and asked for the tenth, or possibly hundredth, time, "Lieutenant Arex, have you located them yet?"

The Edoan looked back over a feathery shoulder. "No, sir. It is a large world, filled with many distracting life forms."

Uhura looked up from the main readout screen at Spock's science station. "Mr. Scott! That sensory anomaly—it's expanded to cover the whole northern continent."

"Try more to the south of where we set down," Scott suggested to Arex. "It's possible that—" He blinked, spun in the chair to face Uhura. "What's that, Lieutenant?"

"The sensory distortion—it's covered the entire region. We aren't receiving any information from that area."

"That explains why the detectors are so confused," Arex noted with satisfaction. "I thought they were giving awfully peculiar readings."

Scott left the command chair and walked over to check the readouts at the science station. "That does it, Lieutenant," he said finally. "You couldn't locate the Loch Ness monster through that." His face wrinkled in disgust as he examined the distortion-plagued information.

"These figures look like a regurgitated mass of undigested haggis, and they're about as encouragin'." He looked back at the navigation console. "Nonetheless, Mr. Arex, you've got to keep tryin'."

"Yes, sir."

"Kirk to *Enter*—" The captain paused, studied his communicator. "There's some kind of advanced interference on all channels, Mr. Spock." He looked around nervously. "We're going to have to get out of this village on our own—horizontally, for now. I doubt we'll be able to manage that without being seen."

"I'm afraid I agree, Captain," said Spock, turning to study the still-silent huts.

"Remember, keep your phaser on stun. There are no advanced weapons here, no reason to put a native down permanently. Let's get moving."

They started toward the low rise that he and Spock had descended so hopefully the night before. The concentration of thatched houses was thinner there, but to no avail. As soon as

they had emerged from the central clearing, they were spotted by the villagers. The shouting and angry natives reacted to this second escape attempt, as Spock declared sadly, "Most unreasonably."

First one, then a couple, and soon the whole tribe was charging down on them, brandishing spears and clubs and howling deafeningly. The native in the lead, a huge, husky fellow, raised his arm and prepared to hurl one of those thick weapons. His companions started to do likewise.

Apparently the community decision had been made that these strangers were not worth keeping alive any longer.

"Fire," Kirk ordered, at the same time depressing the trigger of his phaser and pointing it at the first aborigine.

Something happened.

His finger froze on the button, unable to depress the trigger the necessary millimeters to fire the weapon. His legs locked in place and his arms were held in an unbreakable yet velvety grasp. Even his eyelids were paralyzed. He tried to blink and couldn't.

Fortunately he wasn't staring at the sun, but he could see Spock nearby, held rigidly in a similar pose in the act of firing his own phaser. Commander bn Bem had been likewise deprived of all mobility.

Around them, the spectrum had gone berserk. He could still see clearly. The charging natives had also been frozen in place, spears poised for flight, clubs held ready to strike—but nothing, nothing looked natural.

Normally brown trees now glowed lambent maroon and sported fluorescent pink foliage. The blue sky overhead had turned a deep green, while the earth underfoot shone orange shot with black. And everything had a hazy, befuzzed edge to it.

Then the Voice sounded.

It was firm, faintly feminine, and hinted at immense power held easily in check. The Voice seemed to originate several centimeters behind Kirk's forehead, and it echoed all around the hollow places within, reverberating gently between his ears.

"No," the Voice instructed, "do not attempt to use your weapons." Kirk experimentally tried to comply and found he could raise his thumb from the trigger. The loosening of control was generalized, enabling him to move his extremities now—fingers, toes, eyes, and mouth.

He utilized the latter to announce unnecessarily, "I'm paralyzed, Mr. Spock."

"We are being held in a new, unique type of force field, Captain," the first officer commented thickly.

"Put away your weapons," the Voice continued. "These are My children. Do not attempt to harm them."

Kirk put aside the question of who was about to harm whom in his desire to learn what was at work here. It was certainly no manifestation of the spear-wielders' minds.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Who are *you*?" came the reply.

Proceed slowly, he warned himself. This is a powerful, unknown quantity with unknowable motivations. Don't anger it, and don't give anything away.

"I'm Captain James Tiberius Kirk of the Federation cruiser *Enterprise*. On my right is my first officer, Mr. Spock, and on his right, Honorary Commander Ari bn Bem of the Pandro system of worlds."

Kirk received the impression that this honest recounting of names and titles satisfied the Voice.

"Why are you here?" it inquired with what sounded like true curiosity. "Why do you disturb this place?"

"It is part of our mission," Kirk tried to explain, striving to make their assignment sound as innocuous as possible. "We are required to classify this planet. We have to take readings, examine the native population, report the state of—"

The Voice interrupted, not angrily, but annoyed. "What gives you the right to intrude here? This planet was not created for your use. My children are not created to be subjects of your tests. Your weapons, bad things, will be nullified."

Kirk watched the phaser he held simply melt away. He experienced no pain, no sensation of heat—only a slight tingle

in his palm after the phaser had completely vanished. The tingling faded rapidly.

"I would say 'nullified' was an understatement, Spock."

Natural color returned without warning. Kirk stumbled, his muscles stiff from being held motionless so long.

Seeing the intruders stumble and the peculiar shiny things disappear from their hands, the natives slowed. They lowered their spears and clubs and clustered tightly around their captives.

"There are times, Mr. Spock," Kirk went on, staring in amazement at his now empty hand, "when I think I should have been a librarian."

"There are those who believe the task of librarian would be equally challenging, Captain," Spock responded as the circle of lowered spears grew denser around them. Sharp points touched the midsections of the three captives. "Though it is undoubtedly less dangerous . . ."

"The disturbance was temporarily localized, Mr. Scott," Uhura reported from the science console. "I have been able to fix it near what appears to be a village of local native life. It's not far from where you originally set down."

"Never mind the disturbance," Scott muttered, eyeing Arex. "Have you found the captain and Mr. Spock yet?"

"I've located emanations which could be the captain's and Commander Spock's," he explained carefully, with the emphasis on the 'could be.' "But the sensory anomaly has so interfered with our instrumentation that it is impossible to make positive identification at this time."

"Which means—" Uhura began, but Scott cut her off.

" 'Could be' is good enough for me, right now, Lieutenant. Ready a security landing squad. We're going down there with questions and phasers." He rose from the con and headed toward the turbolift

Kirk, Spock, and bn Bem found themselves secured within the three cages only recently vacated. This time they were surrounded by several guards who looked alert and ugly. Kirk

did not enjoy the return to familiar surroundings. Their moment of liberty had been shortlived and short-circuited by a mysterious unseen power which saw fit to side with the antisocial locals. And now they didn't even have the possibility of recovering their phasers or communicators. The former had been melted into nothingness, and the latter were confiscated by their captors.

As might be expected, Commander bn Bem did not improve the situation any. "You've mishandled problem again, Kirk Captain," the Pandronian berated him. "This One judges you not an intelligent captain."

Kirk was almost too discouraged by their failed escape and subsequent recapture to respond. "Commander bn Bem, Mr. Spock and I are here in the first place because we thought you were worth rescuing. Don't misunderstand me. It was to preserve good relations between the Federation and planet Pandro, not out of any overwhelming affection for your person."

"Planet Pandro," bn Bem riposted, "is unconcerned as to fate of This One. Planet Pandro will not have dealings with ineffectual and inferior species. You've failed everything you have attempted. You have not rescued This One and you have not been able to handle local primitives."

At the conclusion of this sneering polemic, seeing that the guards were temporarily inattentive, the commander literally came apart at the seams.

His head hopped down off his shoulders, moving on short stumpy legs. His upper torso, headless now, walked on long arms, while both legs, joined at the top, slid easily through the bars of the cage. These parts were followed by the rest of the commander.

The head turned back to call to Kirk and Spock. "This One wishes you—what is the Federation-Sol word—luck? Yes, luck. You will require it."

With a contemptuous salute from one of the arms attached to the upper torso, the components of the commander scuttled separately into the surrounding brush.

"Wait! Unlock us—set us free!" Kirk finally gave up shouting at the unresponsive forest. Meanwhile, the guards noted the

sudden disappearance of one of their captives, yet again. Much frantic gabbling and gesticulating ensued, after which most of them started off into the jungle, following the tracks of bn Bem's main legs. Some shook spears and clubs at the two men still imprisoned, made faces promising dire developments on their return.

Kirk sympathized with them.

"So much for interspecies loyalty and Pandronian-Federation friendship," he muttered angrily. "Well, fine! We're going to get no help from our guest, we cannot communicate with these natives, and we can't get through to the ship. What now?"

"Perhaps," Spock mused thoughtfully, "we can regain the attention of the powerful local intelligence and reason with it."

The aborigines had left the communicators unguarded nearby. Spock succeeded in unraveling enough of one vine to make a small lasso. Kirk watched uneasily, expecting some native to happen along at any moment, while Spock patiently cast and recast the line.

Eventually they regained their communicators. But a furtive attempt to contact the ship produced the same results as before—nothing.

Kirk studied the device as if it were capable of producing the miracle they hoped for. "It's worth a try, I suppose." He started to talk, then hesitated. "How do you address something you've never seen and cannot imagine?" He shrugged as Spock regarded him silently.

"Oh, well . . . Kirk to alien intelligence, Kirk to alien intelligence. This is Captain James Kirk calling the controlling intelligence of this world. Answer—respond, please."

He felt something of the fool talking into a communicator directed at thin air. It probably would be as effective to throw his head back and howl at the sky. But using the communicator couldn't hurt.

He continued trying, to continued nonresponse.

"Perhaps an offering of some sort, Captain," suggested Spock.

Kirk eyed his first officer evenly. "Whatever we're dealing with, Mr. Spock, I don't think we can bribe it. Not that we've

much to bribe with, but somehow I think it's imperative we be honest with it." He directed his voice to the small pickup and tried again, earnestly.

"Kirk to alien intelligence, Kirk to alien intelligence." He paused, shaking his head. "Good idea, and that's all, Spock."

"Hmmm," the Vulcan murmured. "If we connect our two communicators, we can generate a single high-energy burst, several times the strength a single communicator can put out. That might draw more attention to us." He finished the proposal unwaveringly:

"Doing so will also render both communicators powerless in a very short time."

"Do it," Kirk concurred. "They're useless now anyway, if we can't reach the ship through them."

"The interference could clear later, Captain."

"Yes, but by then our jailers will be back and will take them away from us again. They'll put them way out of reach. Let's take the gamble, Spock."

"Precisely my thoughts, Captain." He extended both hands and arms through the bars of his cage.

Kirk moved over to the side facing Spock's cage. He made a one, two, three gesture with the hand holding the communicator and let it fly with a soft underhand toss. Spock caught it neatly and bent immediately to the task of mating the two instruments.

Ordinarily he could have accomplished the task in a couple of minutes, but the circumstances were not as conducive to such work as were the labs on board the *Enterprise*. Nevertheless, he managed it.

When they were firmly locked together, he tossed the hybrid back to Kirk, who checked the reintegrated circuitry and nodded approval. He switched it on, felt the warmth immediately as the double-powered device began to build toward overload.

"This is Captain James Tiberius Kirk calling the ruling intelligence of this world. Can you hear me? If so, please acknowledge."

He repeated the call over and over, working against the mounting heat in the joined communicators, steadily adjusting the frequency modulator.

"Kirk to entity, Kirk to entity. This is Captain James Tiberius Kirk calling the—"

The wooden bars of the cage turned violet, the ground became orange shot with black, and he found his fingers frozen on the double communicator.

"I am here," the Voice announced gently.

"We apologize for our intrusion," Kirk explained hurriedly. "We didn't realize the true situation here. If we had, we certainly would not have proceeded as we have. If you will permit us, we will leave immediately in our vessel and not return. Nor will others of our kind come.

"If we do not return, then others of our Federation will surely come and you will be troubled no end. Please understand, this is not a threat. They will come not as destroyers, but rather as curious explorers."

There was a long silence during which Kirk discovered that despite his paralysis he could still sweat.

"This is good," the Voice finally decided. Kirk let out a private shout. "Go, then—go now and do not return."

The paralysis vanished. Kirk stretched in relief. "Just one more thing: There's a third member of our group."

"I detect no third intelligence here," the Voice responded, sounding puzzled.

"He, uh, left this immediate area," Kirk hastened to explain.

The Voice ignored him. "You must go. You must not interfere with the natural activities of My children. I will allow you to contact your ship again, but go *now*."

Kirk didn't hesitate. Rapidly he disconnected the two communicators and checked the power leads. "Still functioning—*whew!*" A second sufficed to reset his own communicator on standard ground-to-ship frequency.

"Kirk to *Enterprise*. Kirk to—"

Response was gratifyingly fast. "*Enterprise*," an excited voice sounded over the little speaker. "Uhura here. Captain, are you all right?"

"Affirmative. Stand by." He looked across at Spock. "We're not leaving without bn Bem. He's still our responsibility, and I won't abandon him here—no matter how much he deserves it. I can't play personalities in this." He returned his attention to the communicator.

"Lieutenant Uhura, beam down a security squad with tricorders set for Pandronian scan."

"Aye, aye, sir. Mr. Scott has already readied one, with phaser cannon."

"Belay that, Lieutenant!" Kirk ordered frantically. "No heavy weapons—just tricorders. Hop to it. Kirk out." He flipped the communicator shut and stuck it back to his waist.

"Cannon or no, the intelligence will still be most displeased, Captain."

"I'll worry about that when I have to, Mr. Spock," replied Kirk firmly. "Our primary concern now is to recover Commander bn Bem, whatever the opposition." He looked toward the center of the village clearing. "Here they come . . ."

Small rainbow whirlwinds began to form before them. Six crew members appeared, five of them clad in security tunics, the sixth in that of the engineering division.

"Captain, Mr. Spock," Scott exclaimed the moment he had fully rematerialized and had time for a look around, "are you all right?" He pulled his phaser, adjusted it, and began burning through the fastenings on the cage door.

"All right now, Scotty," Kirk replied.

The last fiber gave and Kirk was freed. One of the ensigns had performed a similar service for Spock.

"Spread out, staying within sight of each other at all times. You're all familiar with the *Enterprise*'s guest, Commander Ari bn Bem of Pandro?" There were nods and signs of affirmation, several of them embroidered with personal opinion.

"This is a priority assignment," Kirk warned them sternly. "Personal opinions and feelings have no place here. We may encounter hostile native bipeds. Stun only for self-protection, and then only as a last resort.

"Now, let's spread out and try to locate Commander bn Bem. He's split into three individual parts."

"Beggin' pardon, sir," Scott blurted, voicing the general confusion. "Three parts?"

"Commander bn Bem is some kind of colony creature," Kirk explained. "He can operate as a single large individual, as you've seen him, or as three separated segments—maybe more, we don't know." He grinned tightly. "I guarantee you won't confuse part of him for native life."

The group turned and started off toward the section of forest the Pandronian had run into, spreading out as Kirk had directed and working their way through the beginnings of the thickening undergrowth.

As it developed, they got no further than Spock, Kirk, and bn Bem had the previous night.

Captain's admonition or no, when confronted by the sudden appearance of numerous screaming natives three meters tall, all charging toward them waving spears and clubs, none of the security personnel hesitated. Low-power phaser bursts colored the air and several natives dropped, temporarily paralyzed.

The Voice, despite Spock's fears, did not interfere. The ground remained brown, the leaves green, and their limbs mobile. They continued into the jungle.

It wasn't long before they encountered the main body of warriors. They were returning to the village with a recaptured (and intact) Commander bn Bem in their midst. He was tied like a tiger, every part of his body secured with vines and lianas.

A few phaser bursts were enough to send the rest of the natives running in terror. They left their weapons and fallen comrades and vanished into the trees, leaving a securely bound bn Bem standing alone behind them. Kirk thought the commander looked rather embarrassed.

"We couldn't help it, sir," Scott declared, running over to join Kirk as the captain moved toward the Pandronian. "The crew had to defend themselves."

"Don't worry about it now, Scotty," Kirk reassured him, anxiously studying the sky and the terrain around them. "Let's

get our guest and get out of here before we make any real trouble."

bn Bem's head inclined forward and there was a moroseness, a modesty in his tone Kirk had never heard. "Embarrassment results," he declared softly. "This One is shamed. This One has failed in its judgment."

If that was a plea for sympathy, it was wasted on Kirk. "You have endangered all of us by your actions," he chastised the commander, "and you've forced us to interfere with the natives of a world that deserves prime directive protection—not to mention outright quarantine."

The Pandronian struggled to regain some of his former haughtiness. "This One exists by its own standards," he announced, rather lamely.

"Not on my ship, you don't. Not any more. I'll stand for a lot, Commander, but when the *Enterprise* itself is endangered, diplomacy takes a back seat." He kicked at the dirt and reached for his communicator.

The dirt turned orange and froze in midfall as colorful aberrations swept the landscape and all Kirk's fears were suddenly realized. He fought the paralysis, fought to activate his communicator. If he could just make one shout, relay one order to have them beamed up . . .

But the effort was useless. His finger wouldn't move another millimeter closer to that crucial switch.

There was no fury in the Voice. No spite, no indignation. Kirk had the impression that such petty emotional flavorings were beyond the mind behind the Voice. If it contained any recognizable inflection, it was one of puzzlement.

"You are still here," it announced solemnly. "And you are still interfering." Then it added, without any change in tone, "I am angry."

"We didn't mean to interfere," Kirk explained desperately. "We have our own rules of conduct which forbid intrusion into the affairs of others. We—"

"Then you have not only disobeyed My rules, you have broken your own as well."

"No. We simply could not leave one of our own behind. It is our responsibility to take care of those placed under our

protection, just as it's your responsibility to take care of yours.

"We could not leave Commander bn Bem where he could interfere with your"—he hesitated—"children. Would you really want that?" He waited tensely for the response.

"Yes," that rippling voice finally replied, "it is so. You have some wisdom, James Tiberius Kirk. The lost one is found, then?"

"He is found," Kirk admitted. "We will leave."

Another voice sounded—bn Bem's. "This One is greatly distressed. This One has erred. The mission was to judge, and the right of judgment no longer exists. This One must disassemble unity."

"Disassemble?" Kirk started.

"Never again to exist as a cooperation. This unity is defective, insufficient, inadequate, and false. This unit must cease to exist."

Kirk started to protest—certainly a severe reprimand was in order, but as he understood it the Pandronian was contemplating suicide. His personal inclinations were overriden by more powerful concerns. *"No!"*

bn Bem looked around wildly. "What . . .?"

"Do not destroy yourself."

"But—This One has erred," bn Bem protested. "This One has tried to judge Kirk Captain and Spock Commander, only to be found himself wanting. This One has acted wrongly."

"You may have made a mistake," the Voice declared, without judging the Pandronian's actions in any way, "but if you disassemble you cannot learn from your error. Errors demand recognition. They also demand nonrepetition. If you disassemble, you will not be able to never repeat your mistake."

Spock admired the logic of it while bn Bem argued uncertainly. "And you—you do not demand punishment, for the breaking of your laws?"

Kirk was ready to scream; was bn Bem trying to get them *all* disassembled? He needn't have worried. He was underestimating their observer.

"Punishment?" Now the puzzlement was unmistakable. "What is punishment?"

"Revenge."

"Revenge? Intelligent beings require no revenge. Punishment is necessary only where learning cannot occur without it. You are behind such things as I am above it. My children here are different. That is why you must leave, so as not to corrupt their development with such obscene concepts as punishment and revenge."

The last comment was uttered with an inflection of contempt so strong it made Kirk momentarily dizzy.

"I am humbled," was all bn Bem managed to whisper.

Suddenly Kirk found that his own anger at bn Bem had become a source of embarrassment. "We'll be on our way now. if we may," he asked humbly.

"Yes. Go now . . ."

Natural coloration returned to the jungle and Kirk regained control of his body. For a long moment he studied the landscape, but saw only trees and vines, heard only the sounds of bird-things and shy crawlers. There was the rustle of a breeze. Nothing more.

He took out his communicator, addressed it slowly. "Kirk to *Enterprise*. Beam us up . . ."

bn Bem was with him as the captain resumed his position at the con. "Stand by to break orbit."

Spock was back at the library station, awaiting instructions. "Mr. Spock, classify this planet, Delta Theta Three, as being under strict Federation quarantine from this stardate forward. Said quarantine subject to Starfleet review of the official report of this mission. Under no circumstances is any vessel to approach this world."

"A restriction planet Pandro will also respect," bn Bem declared helpfully.

"I compliment you both on a wise decision, gentlemen," said Spock, working to prepare the necessary documentation.

"It's necessary for them as well as for us, Spock," Kirk explained.

Spock nodded, turned his gaze to the main viewscreen. It displayed a wide-sensor picture of the planet in question, still rotating demurely below them, giving no hint of the extraordinary alien intelligence inhabiting it.

"It is fascinating, Captain. A highly advanced alien entity using this system as a laboratory for guiding another people to racial maturity. Almost a god, you might say."

"Such comparisons are as meaningless as they are farfetched, Mr. Spock. By contrast to the ruling mind of Delta Theta Three, we are all children."

"In This One's case," bn Bem mumbled with becoming humility, "is still an eggling."

Kirk looked gratified. If, despite all the trouble, this expedition had taught the Pandronian a little modesty, then it was worth all they'd been through.

"Take us out of orbit, Mr. Sulu. It's time to—"

Uhura broke in with an exclamation of surprise. "Captain, I'm picking up a transmission from the surface."

"Put it through the bridge speakers, Lieutenant."

Kirk, Spock, and bn Bem recognized that wizened, maternal voice, which rippled and heaved with vast sighs like some midocean wave:

"Go in peace. Go in peace, children. You have learned much, though you have much left to learn. Be proud and—someday, perhaps—return."

That was the tantalizing bequest they bore with them as, at warp four, the *Enterprise* left the system of the sun Delta Theta.

That was a promise worth carrying home . . .

III

Kirk and Spock remained affected by their contact with the extraordinary intelligence experimenting on Delta Theta Three, only in their case the effects didn't show. The opposite was true of Commander Ari bn Bem.

In contrast to the first part of the voyage, the commander had turned into a model passenger. His demeanor as they traveled toward Starfleet Science Station 24 was downright subdued.

Previously his interest in Federation procedures and operations had run from nonexistent to outright disdain. Following the humbling experience on Delta Theta Three, he exhibited a powerful desire to use the limited time remaining to him to learn all he could about the methods of Federation survey, navigation, research, and other exploratory techniques. So furiously did he plunge into his new studies that Kirk feared for his health. The commander refused to slow down, however.

"Have wasted much time already, Kirk Captain," bn Bem told him in response to Kirk's expressions of concern. "This One's ignorance must be assuaged. Cost to body self is negligible in comparison."

bn Bem's prior intransigence manifested itself now and then, but only when the material he wished to absorb wasn't instantly available, or when he chose to dispute a bit of science or procedure. So hard did he question various technicians that they almost wished they were again victims of the Pandronian's contempt instead of his voracious desire to learn.

It had been Kirk's intention to leave the commander at Science Station 24. According to the captain's original orders from Starfleet Command, the commander would remain at the station for a month, intensively researching Federation analytic methodology until a Pandronian ship arrived to take him home.

But Kirk was not to lose bn Bem's company as soon as he thought.

"I have contact with Science Station Twenty-four, Captain," Uhura announced. "They have an urgent message."

"Classified?" Kirk asked discreetly, with a glance at the science station, where bn Bem was engaged in earnest discussion with Spock.

Uhura checked her instrumentation. "It doesn't appear to be, Captain."

"Very well, Lieutenant. Put it on the screen." Kirk swiveled the command chair as Uhura moved to comply. A brief burst of static and the viewscreen produced a portrait.

The face of Lieutenant Commander Kunjolly stared back at him. Long white sideburns looking like puffs of steel wool flared out from skin the hue of dark chocolate. In an age of scientific miracles, the station commander's smooth pate was a glaring anomaly.

"Captain Kirk," the slightly high-pitched voice offered in greeting. "Good to see you again."

"Hello, Monty," a smiling Kirk replied. "Nice to see you, too. I have some good news for you." It would be considered more than good, he reflected, when the no doubt apprehensive station staff learned of their incipient guest's transformation.

"And I have some puzzling news," Kunjolly riposted, "though not for you. But go ahead and tell me yours first."

Kirk looked uncertainly at the screen. "All right."

He glanced over at the science station. The conversation between bn Bem and Spock had grown lively.

"Your assigned visitor had an experience at our final survey stop which seems to have modified the inherent irascibility of his kind. I don't know how familiar you are with the Pandronians, but you'll be glad to know that this one's become almost charming."

Kunjolly grinned back at him. "That's very gratifying to learn, Captain." The grin turned to a concerned frown. "Though I wonder if we'll be enjoying his company for long."

Kirk's puzzlement grew. "What are you talking about, Monty?" Visions of having to play host to even a reformed bn Bem rose in his mind.

The station commander shuffled some papers out of Kirk's view, then looked back into the pickup. "I'm holding a sealed message for your Pandronian VIP, Captain, beamed straight to us from his homeworld of Pandro."

"For me a message?" came a startled query. Apparently bn Bem hadn't been as totally absorbed in his conversation with Spock as Kirk had thought. Now he ambled over to stare at the screen, then down at Kirk.

"What means this, Kirk Captain?"

"I was hoping you could tell me, Commander."

"This One is expecting no sealed messages from home," bn Bem declared openly. "This One is thoroughly puzzled."

"You've no idea what the message is?"

"None more than you, Kirk Captain."

"Oh, and something else, Captain Kirk."

Kirk glanced back up at the screen. "What is it, Monty?"

The station commander looked to his left. "I have additional orders for the *Enterprise* from Starfleet Command. They read as follows:

" 'The *Enterprise* is hereby directed to provide, pursuant to Federation law and naval restrictions, all services requested by Pandronian representative Commander Ari bn Bem subsequent to his receipt of important message to him from his government.' "

"That's all very irregular," Kirk observed, a mite testily. "Why wasn't the message sent directly to us? It could have reached us several days ago."

"The Federation orders came through only this morning, stationtime, Captain Kirk. As for the Pandronian message, there wouldn't have been any point in sending it to you."

"Why not?" Kirk wanted to know.

"It was stated explicitly in English accompanying the Pandronian that delivery of the message was to await complementary orders from Starfleet—the one that came through this morning.

"Besides, it's all in Pandronian code. I wouldn't like to try transcribing it for rebroadcast. No one here has any clue as to the contents of the message."

"Someone at Starfleet must, Captain," Spock put in, "if they acceded so readily to the Pandronian request."

"Not necessarily, Spock," Kirk mused thoughtfully. "The Pandronians might have made a request for unspecified aid. Starfleet wants Pandro as an ally badly enough that they might have promised our help without knowing the specifics of what that help is wanted for."

"That is possible, Captain," Spock conceded.

"Very well. The sooner we dock in, the faster well find out what this is all about." He snapped directions to those manning the con. "Mr. Sulu, Mr. Arex, bring us into Station Twenty-four. Gently, if you please." His attention returned to the screen.

"We should be in your office in a little while, Monty. I expect you're as curious to know the nature of that message from Pandro as we are."

"I am, Captain Kirk. However, the orders from Starfleet are all-inclusive, which means that Commander bn Bem need not apprise us of his message's contents."

"I know," Kirk admitted, trying not to let his worry show. "*Enterprise* out."

"Station Twenty-four out," a solemn Kunjolly acknowledged, closing the transmission.

"Well, Commander," Kirk began, facing bn Bem, "still no idea of what's going on?"

"Not ever before have I heard of such a thing, Kirk Captain," the Pandronian replied. He seemed genuinely concerned. Reflecting his nervousness, his head shifted from side to side on his shoulders.

Even though he knew that a Pandronian could separate his body into at least three major sections—each one capable of independent motility—Kirk still found it unnerving to see the commander adjust his structure so casually.

"It must be important, Captain," insisted Spock from his position at the science station. "By requesting such extreme

assistance from Starfleet, the Pandronians are jeopardizing their neutrality. That is a great deal to risk merely to speed the commander on his way. Obviously, his presence is desired for some emergency so severe that they cannot wait for one of their own ships to come and pick him up."

"Makes sense, Mr. Spock," the captain agreed. From what he knew of Pandro, which was little, Kirk found the entire situation unlikely. Something had worried the Pandronian government enough for them to modify their fierce independence. That was all to the Federation's good, but not necessarily to that of his ship.

Science Station 24 consisted of a central hub in the shape of a slowly turning disk from which the multiple spokes of connector passageways protruded. Various-shaped modular stations bulged at the terminus of each long pressurized corridor; spheres, cubes, ellipsoids, and combinations of these and other forms held laboratories and living quarters, the whole station a hallucinant's vision of an exploded popcorn ball.

Each module housed a different function, from complete laboratories dedicated to the study of zero-g biology to long tubular structures filled with facilities for examining the movement of subatomic particles.

One of the longer spokes ended in a simple large airlock. No other modules were placed near it. Even so, it was a delicate maneuver on Sulu's part to align the *Enterprise* properly with the station docking port. The simple spoke provided none of the navigational aids of a completely self-enclosed Starfleet station dock, but those weren't required here. Only supply ships and occasional ships like the *Enterprise* on special missions stopped at the isolated research stations. Elaborate facilities would have been wasted.

Gravity increased to near normal as the turbolift carried Kirk, Spock, and Commander Ari bn Bem down the long pressurized shaft toward the central station hub. From the central turbolift depot, where cargo and passenger lifts transported supplies and personnel to the many distant lab modules, it was a short walk to the outer offices of the station commandant, Lieutenant Commander Kunjolly. An ensign

greeted them and after a short conversation via intercom, directed them to the inner sanctum.

"Good to see you again, Captain Kirk," Kunjolly exclaimed as the three entered. He left his desk to shake Kirk's hand, then repeated the formality with the *Enterprise*'s, first officer. "And you, Mr. Spock."

"Dr. Kunjolly," the science officer said by way of return, using a warmer title than the station chiefs military one. Spock was anxious to learn the nature of Kunjolly's extraordinary message for bn Bem, and the sooner formalities, however pleasant, were over, the better he would like it

Spock's concern was echoed by the tall blue form alongside him. "Anxiousness This One expresses to observe message," stammered bn Bem hurriedly.

"I understand," Kunjolly declared. Returning to his seat behind the big desk, he passed a palm over its left side. There was a soft beep, duplicated by a second beep as his hand crossed over the spot once again.

A panel flipped open behind the desk. All three guests watched as the station commandant used an electronic key to open a locked drawer. After removing a tiny metal cube he relocked the drawer and pressed a hidden button. A three-panel viewer common to conference rooms on the *Enterprise* popped up in the center of the desk. Kunjolly inserted the message cube properly and hit still another switch.

Kirk and Spock stared expectantly at the tripartite screen as it lit up, but the flow of information which raced across was disappointingly incomprehensible. Not that either man had anticipated understanding the Pandronian message, but Kirk had half hoped he could make something out of the communication.

The complex cryptography proved totally alien, though, as alien as the Pandronians themselves. While Kirk waited impatiently, Commander bn Bem avidly examined the steady stream of information. Occasionally the Pandronian would produce a low gurgling noise, sounding like a faulty water pipe, but otherwise he remained silent as he studied the message. At the conclusion of the message, bn Bem let out a

startling yelp, his eyes rolled over, and he collapsed to the floor.

"Commander bn Bem!" Kirk shouted, rushing to kneel above the motionless form. Kunjolly hurried around from behind his desk, and Spock also bent over the prone Pandronian. The commander's eyes remained shut and his upper torso appeared to be shivering slightly.

Kirk put out a hand toward one shoulder, intending to give the body a gentle shake, and abruptly hesitated.

"Mr. Spock, how much do we know of Pandronian physiology?"

"Practically nothing, Captain."

Kirk's hand drew back.

Kunjolly's hands had tightened into worried fists. "There must have been something powerful in that message. It appears to have induced a fatal shock."

"No matter the cause," Spock noted grimly. "If he dies here, aboard a Federation outpost while under Federation protection, we will be blamed. Not for inducing the shock—that is surely the fault of the message—but for not knowing how to cure its effects. Pandronian-Federation relations will suffer."

Kirk noticed that the shivering continued. "He's not dead—not yet, anyway. Monty, get in touch with your medical personnel. Mr. Spock, contact Dr. McCoy, explain what's happened, and have him rush down here. Perhaps working together we can—"

Spock put up a hand for silence. "Just a moment, Captain, Dr. Kunjolly." The station commandant paused at his desk, one hand ready to activate the intercom there.

Kirk stared in fascination. The body of the unconscious Pandronian was coming apart. First the lower torso slithered away from the commander's stomach. The upper torso, moving on mobile arms, detached itself at the lower part of the neck. Both lower and upper body sections moved independently to take up positions on either side of the limp head.

Tiny cilia extending from the upper part of the hips commenced a feathery caress of the face while the two hands

massaged the back of the skull, which raised up slightly on cilia of its own to provide easy access for the arms.

Kirk stared openmouthed at the nightmare scene being played out before them. "The Pandronian form," Spock commented quietly, "appears capable of taking care of itself under circumstances which would leave a human—or Vulcan—relatively helpless."

As if to confirm further the first officer's speculation, Commander bn Bem's eyes blinked open seconds later. Still moving on neck cilia, the now-alert head adjusted itself on the floor. Rushing about like a family of varmints scurrying to flee an owl, the remaining sections of the commander's body reattached themselves at neck and stomach.

bn Bem placed both hands on the floor and sat up, staring at the stupefied onlookers with a puzzled expression. "This One fainted at import of message, Kirk Captain. Something the matter is?"

"Uh, you fell down without warning. We thought you needed assistance."

bn Bem got to his feet, a touch of his natural aloofness reasserting itself. "Is not to worry. Natural superiority of Pandronian lifeform assures self-care in such matters." He moved to the desk, addressed a still-dazed Kunjolly. The station commandant, Kirk reminded himself, had not seen the startling Pandronian separate-but-equal performance before today.

"Import of message overwhelmed This One temporarily. Must run through again, please."

"What?" muttered Kunjolly, in the voice of a man emerging from a dream.

"Must see again the message." bn Bem gestured at the blank triple screen.

"Yes . . . of course." The station commandant regained his composure and pushed the appropriate button. Once more the coded Pandronian message splashed its cryptic contents across the desk screens.

Spock chose the moment to whisper to Kirk, "A most interesting display, Captain, on the commander's part. Apparently the shock of the message only incapacitated the

brain, leaving the rest of the body free to work at restoring consciousness. A useful function for an intelligent being to have. The advantages would apply to a host of diseases—the problems of hangover, for example."

"True," agreed Kirk readily. "I can see where—" He paused, gaped at his first officer. "Now, why would a nonimbibing Vulcan be interested in hangover remedies, Mr. Spock?"

"While not subject to such a primitive malady, Captain, I can still appreciate the luxury of a physiology which keeps the rest of the body from suffering for the transgressions of a poorly functioning brain."

Kirk was about to reply when he was interrupted by a series of shouts and yelps from Commander bn Bem. The Pandronian was twisting his hands about one another in an unfamiliar fashion while shaking his head from side to side. On occasion as the commander gave vent to his emotions his head would lift up slightly on its motile cilia and run back and forth on his shoulders, sometimes turning complete circles. This was an upsetting sight even to one who by now should be inured to the unique abilities of the Pandronian form.

"Oh, woe! Oh, incomprehensibility! Oh, abomination most sublime!" bn Bem turned eyes filled with disbelief on Kirk. "Something that cannot be imagined has happened."

Kirk noted that the screens were blank once again. The message had run its course for the second time.

He wondered how much of this naked emoting was for his benefit, in anticipation of a request yet to come.

At least the commander's head had ceased its gyrations and had seen fit to sit in normal head-fashion solidly on bn Bem's shoulders. For this Kirk was thankful. "Is there something we can do to help?" he asked, knowing full well that the Pandronian government had already made that request of Starfleet Command, albeit in a generalized form.

"Is," acknowledged bn Bem tersely. "Must go This One with you to planet Pandro immediately."

"With us?" Kirk exclaimed, his eyebrows suddenly matching Spock's for altitude.

"That explains the orders, Captain," Spock pointed out.

"Yes, to go immediately all of us," the excited Pandronian insisted. "No delay to be brooked." He brushed past Kirk and Spock as he headed for the outside corridor leading toward the central station hub. "Without pause follow now, Kirk Captain. Of the essence is time."

"But we—" Too late; the commander was gone, presumably on his way back to the *Enterprise*.

Kirk took a deep breath, turned back to a dumbfounded Kunjolly.

"I'd like to see those Starfleet orders for myself, Monty."

"Of course, Captain," the station commandant replied understandingly. Reaching into his desk, he withdrew another cube, replaced the Pandronian message cube with it, and activated the playback.

This time the triple screen bloomed with the face and upper body of a Starfleet admiral. A second human hovered in the background of the recording. Kirk didn't recognize the nonspeaker's face, but the trim uniform of the Federation Diplomatic Corps was unmistakable. Both he and Spock listened as the verbal orders played through. It was quiet in the office for a long moment after the communiqué ceased.

"But surely, Monty," Kirk argued out loud, "rendering services can't mean that Commander bn Bem is permitted to commandeer the *Enterprise* for his own private transportation."

Kunjolly looked thoughtful, then ventured almost apologetically, "What are your next stated orders, Captain?"

"Actually, we don't have any," Kirk told him. "On dropping off Commander bn Bem here we were supposed to"—his voice sank—"await new directives from Starfleet."

"In the absence of additional orders or specifics, the message appears inarguable, Captain," Spock finally mused aloud. "We are to provide whatever services Commander bn Bem requires, while keeping within Federation law. The commander desires to go directly to Pandro, therefore we must take him there.

"I confess I too have mixed feelings about traveling to the world which developed those attitudes the commander espoused prior to our experiences on Delta Theta Three, but

naturally we cannot allow personal opinions to interfere with the Starfleet directive."

"Naturally," Kirk concurred. "Though just this once I wish that—" He stopped, frowning. "Spock, we don't know why the commander has to go to Pandro so quickly. Could it violate Federation and Starfleet law if he fails to tell us?"

"Unfortunately," Spock responded, "I am afraid that because our orders were so general in scope, he need not. But considering his altered attitude, I have grounds to believe he will."

"Good-bye, Monty," Kirk said quickly. "It looks as if you'll have to wait a while longer to entertain a Pandronian representative."

"From what I've heard and seen, Captain," the station commandant replied, "I don't think the delay will upset too many of my associates."

After rushing for the turbolift depot, Kirk and Spock had to wait around for an empty capsule. In his haste to return to the *Enterprise*, a frantic Commander bn Bem had taken the last one by himself.

"I hope," Kirk noted with wry amusement, "he has the decency to wait for us to return before leaving. I wouldn't put it past him to try to order the *Enterprise* about on his own!"

IV

The Pandronian commander didn't go quite that far, but his impatience was unmistakable to Kirk when he walked onto the ship's bridge.

"Is in greatest hurry to depart, Kirk Captain," bn Bem rattled off at top speed, accompanied by much waving of hands and rolling of eyes. At least the eyes remained in place in his head, Kirk mused gratefully. "Is of the urgency utmost to proceed to Pandro at maximum velocity."

"Just try to take it easy, Commander," Kirk advised the apoplectic Pandronian as both he and Spock resumed their stations. "We'll get you there as fast as is practicable."

"Not to delay," bn Bem advised him, his voice assuming a warning tone. "Is best for all to remember the delicate nature of present negotiations between planet Pandro and Federation, not to mention Pandro and Klingon Empire."

"Don't threaten me, Commander," Kirk told him quietly. "I have my orders, which instruct me to take you home if that is your wish. I'll carry those orders out." His voice rose ever so slightly: "But threats from you or anyone else won't slow me or speed me in doing so."

"Slow you or speed you in doing what, Jim?" another voice inquired.

Kirk glanced over a shoulder, saw that McCoy had entered the bridge. "In going to Pandro, Bones."

McCoy's body, unlike Commander bn Bem's, was incapable of separating into three independent parts. The expression on the good doctor's face as he heard Kirk's announcement, however, seemed to suggest that he felt ready to give it a try. His gaze traveled incredulously from Kirk to the phlegmatic bn Bem, then back to Kirk again.

"Pandro! I thought we were going to leave this—going to leave Commander bn Bem here at the station, then proceed on new orders."

"Those *are* our new orders, Bones, as interpreted by Mr. Spock and myself. We are to render unto bn Bem whatever bn Bem requires. Right now he requires that we get him to Pandro pronto."

"But why, Jim? Why us? Why not a Pandronian vessel?"

"Yes, why the unusual haste, Commander?" asked Spock from the science station.

"Insensitive beings!" bn Bem raged, a touch of his former personality reasserting itself. "Unfeeling ones! Explanations to demand while sacrilege occurs!"

Still fuming at the incomprehensible insult caused by Spock's simple question, the commander stalked off the bridge.

McCoy stared after the fuming alien until the turbolift doors had closed behind him, then glanced sardonically back to Kirk. "Well, now that everything's been made clear . . ."

"Do not be too harsh on our guest, Doctor," advised an ever considerate Spock. "From what we now know of his psychology I have to guess that his fury is motivated not by hostility but by some real atrocity which has taken place on his homeworld. I believe that if we do not press him for information now, he will inform us of the cause of his anguish before we arrive at Pandro."

For a long while it didn't look as if the first officer's prediction would come to pass. Commander bn Bem remained secluded in his cabin, having his meals sent in and refusing to have anything whatsoever to do with anyone. All invitations to emerge were met with a stony silence, broken occasionally by gruff mutters in Pandronian which sounded vaguely like cursing.

All that changed of necessity when the *Enterprise* eventually entered orbit around Pandro and the transporter room was prepared to beam them down. Or so Kirk thought as he, Spock, and McCoy stood waiting in the chamber for the commander to appear.

"Surely, Jim," a still disbelieving McCoy murmured, "we're not going to beam down to a world possibly populated by arrogant megalomaniacs without having the slightest idea of what we're letting ourselves in for?"

"Don't worry, Bones. We're going to stay right here until I get some kind of explanation out of bn Bem."

"If you recall the wording of our orders from Starfleet, Captain . . ." Spock put in by way of gentle reminder.

"I recall the wording perfectly, Spock. We are to render service to Commander bn Bem as he requires."

When it became clear that the captain had nothing to add, Spock pressed on. "Would you still refuse him beam-down then, Captain, if he continues to refuse information?"

Kirk smiled knowingly. "Of course not, Spock. As you just noted, I couldn't do that without violating our orders. But I'm betting that bn Bem, this close to home, won't want to chance that."

Several minutes passed in idle speculation among the officers as to the cause of the Pandronian commander's extraordinary summons home. No one had produced a likely explanation by the time the subject of their conversation arrived.

Spock and McCoy followed Kirk into the Transporter Chamber, while Commander bn Bem exercised his newly won knowledge by moving to the transporter console where he instructed Chief Scott on beam-down coordinates. Scott had to admit to himself that the Pandronian had done his homework; the coordinates were precise and neatly translated from Pandronian navigational terms.

The commander moved rapidly then to take up a position alongside the three waiting officers. Kirk nodded toward the console.

"Stand by to energize, Mr. Scott."

"Standin' by, sir," replied the chief engineer.

Kirk waited a couple of seconds for effect before he turned to stare hard at the Pandronian. "All right, Commander bn Bem. We've brought you this far unquestioningly, but we're not beaming down until I find out what we're likely to encounter. What was that message you received all about?"

"At once to beam down!" the commander retorted angrily. "At once to waste no more time. Is for you to remember orders that—"

Kirk was shaking his head slowly. "Sorry, *that* won't work any more, Commander. Our orders directed us to render you whatever service you required in accordance with Federation law and regulations. For us to beam down ignorant of surface conditions which might prove hazardous to Federation personnel—ourselves—would be in violation of those laws." bn Bem said nothing, but continued to stare belligerently at Kirk.

"Well," Kirk finally prompted the Pandronian, "which'll it be? Do we get some information, or do we sit here until I can get clarification from Starfleet headquarters? And unless Pandronian bureaucracy is astonishingly more efficient than its Federation counterparts, you know how much time *that* will take."

Commander bn Bem's gaze turned toward the deck and he was obviously struggling to control himself. "Is time for This One to have patience," he mumbled. "Is better to be pleasant with misunderstanders."

Eventually he looked up and explained tersely, "You will comprehend full meaning not, but has been *stolen* the Tam Paupa." His enunciation of "stolen" conveyed a sense of intense disgust and disbelief, evident to every listener on the bridge despite their differences in species.

"The Tam Paupa?" Kirk repeated, wrestling with the supple but guttural pronunciation. "I'm afraid we don't know what that is, Commander bn Bem."

The Pandronian looked exasperated. "Did I say not you would not understand? This One endeavors to elucidate.

"Has been worn well Tam Paupa by every ruler of United Planet Pandro for"—he hesitated briefly—"for twelve thousand of your years. To understand importance of Tam Paupa you must realize, hard though it be, Kirk Captain, that on rare occasions we Pandronians can be slightly testy, and argumentative even."

"Oh, we couldn't possibly think of you that way," McCoy chirped in sarcastically, "but if you say it's true, I suppose we'll have to believe you—hard though it be."

"Take it easy, Bones," Kirk whispered to the doctor, but McCoy's sarcasm was apparently lost on the worried Pandronian.

"Is the wearing of Tam Paupa," bn Bem continued, "which gives elected premier of Pandro the ability to govern fairly and without animosity toward others. Is talent recognized and honored by all Pandronians. Wearer of Tam Paupa never accused of injustices or favoritisms. This has preserved our civilization, Kirk Captain, has permitted Pandro to reach present heights. To imagine government without Tam Paupa not possible.

"An example This One gives. Sixteen hundred of your years ago, was stolen from premier, Tam Paupa. Chaos and civil wars resulting took three hundred years to recover from. That this again should happen is unthinkable." He looked simultaneously revolted and downcast. "Yet happen it has."

"I think I understand. Commander," Kirk responded sympathetically as bn Bem turned away to hide his emotions.

Kirk whispered to the nearby Spock and McCoy, "This Tam Paupa is some sort of crown or other device that somehow enhances the decision-making ability of the elected Pandronian leader while assuring the general populace of his continued impartiality. I'd like to have a look at the mechanism."

"So would I, Captain," Spock agreed readily. "Such a device, if it truly does what the commander says it does, could benefit others besides the Pandronians."

"And now it's been stolen," added McCoy. "Last time it caused three centuries of civil war." He whistled softly. "No wonder the Pandronians are panicked."

"It would appear, Captain," the first officer went on, "that we have been presented a chance to solidify the Federation's position vis-à-vis formal interstellar relations."

"You mean do more than just transport the commander home, as our orders indicate?" Kirk said. Spock nodded slowly and Kirk considered uncertainly. "I don't know, Spock. We know so little about Pandro. What little we do know seems to point to a highly developed society fighting to survive on a primitive world."

"No more time to waste on murmurings idle," a pleading bn Bem interrupted them. "Now to rush-hurry-quick with transporting."

Devoid of any reason to stall further, Kirk gave his assent. The three officers resumed their positions prior to transporting as Kirk faced the console.

"You can energize, Mr. Scott."

"Aye, Captain," the chief engineer acknowledged from behind the console. "I dinna know where these coordinates will set you down. I hope the commander knows what he's doin'."

Kirk recalled the last time they'd set down on a world after bn Bem had programmed the transporter. He uncomfortably remembered rematerializing several meters above open water. But he said nothing, mentally seconding Scotty's wish.

His first impression was that he had materialized at the point of a gun. That was his thought as he stared at the tubular-shaped, lethal-looking instrument a grim-faced and very blue Pandronian was pointing directly at his chest. Glancing around, he saw that the little group was surrounded by similarly armed, equally determined Pandronians.

"What's this all about, bn Bem?" McCoy asked, fighting to keep his anger in check.

"An explanation would certainly seem to be in order, Commander," Spock added more calmly. But he didn't take his eyes off the Pandronian covering him.

"A precaution only, gentlemen," the commander assured them. He spoke to the guards in his own language. Abruptly the weapons went vertical and the intimidating circle turned into an escort of honor.

"This way, please," bn Bem indicated. Kirk, Spock, and McCoy followed the commander at a rapid pace down a high-ceilinged, triangular-shaped corridor, their former captors flanking them on either side.

"I still do not understand," Spock persisted.

"Is sad to admit, Spock Commander," bn Bem proceeded to explain, "but are somewhat paranoid we Pandronians where other races are concerned. As was This One until enlightening experience on Delta Theta Three."

Privately Kirk felt that describing Pandronians as "somewhat paranoid" severely understated their state of mind, but it would have been undiplomatic to argue the point.

They turned several bends in the corridor as Spock wondered aloud, "How did the guards know where we were going to materialize, Commander? You had no contact with the surface prior to our beaming down."

"Oh, is standard landing coordinates for all un-Pandronian visitors," bn Bem told them. "Detectors in chamber sense utilization of various transporter fields and so are alerted the guards."

That satisfied the first officer. It also inspired Kirk to reflect on the fact that the Pandronians were an advanced people whose friendship was well worth cultivating even if their personalities could be somewhat disagreeable.

It also caused him to wonder how the Tam Paupa could have been stolen, since the Pandronians were clearly very security-minded.

A final bend in the corridor and they came up against a closed and guarded door. Commander bn Bem spoke to the two neatly uniformed guards standing before it, and the little party was admitted instantly.

The room they entered was roughly circular in shape. A broad window across the floor showed that they were at least thirty meters above the surface of Pandro. A view of the disjointed Pandronian architecture of the capital city of Tendrazin was visible through the transparent acrylic. Green trees and fuzzy growths of all kinds brightened the cityscape, as would be expected on a world which was primarily savanna and jungle.

The chamber itself was domed, the roof blending into walls of blue, green, and yellow tile. Light filled the room, courtesy of the vast oval skylight above. Where the skylight met the walls, the glass or plastic was composed of multihued mosaics depicting scenes from Pandronian history.

From various points above, globular lamps hung by long thin tubes to provide additional illumination. Scroll cases and sealed cabinets of a wood like oiled cherry lined the walls, alternating with closed doors.

A large half-moon desk of darker wood rested on a raised dais at the far end of the impressive chamber, backed by the sweeping window. Several rows of curved, thickly padded

benches formed concentric arcs before it, the seats adjusted to accommodate the Pandronian physique.

"This is the innermost *Pthad*," bn Bem explained with a touch of pride in his voice, "the seat of our government. Here meet the integrals of the high council to determine policy for all Pandro."

McCoy's attention was focused not on the sumptuous appointments or the view of the city beyond, but on something sandwiched between two nearby cabinets.

"What's that?"

bn Bem glanced in the direction indicated by the doctor. "Is one of the premier's favorite pets."

McCoy strolled over to the large rectangular cage. It was formed of narrow slats of some bright gray metal. Its floor was covered with what appeared to be a mixture of natural growth and dry wood shavings.

Resting in the center of the cage floor lay an animal. It had a plump round body covered with bristly brown fur about a centimeter in length. Seven pairs of legs protruded from seven clearly defined segments. A double tail tipped one end while a tiny ball of a head indicated the other. A single eye glared from its center, with nostrils set to either side and a mouth both above and below the eye.

At the moment, the apparition was munching sedately on some leaves or green paper—Kirk couldn't decide which. It peered up at the onlookers, its single blue eye blinking placidly.

"Not a very cuddly-looking pet," McCoy commented with distaste.

"The *diccob* is amusing, though," countered bn Bem, "and responsive. Watch."

Clapping his hands twice, the commander let out a low-pitched whistle. Immediately the *diccob* eyed him—and went all to pieces. Literally.

Eight sections, including the head, fell away from each other and performed a little scurrying dance, weaving about themselves. As if on cue, they unexpectedly came together. Only now the *diccob* stood erect, a bipedal form. Two segments served as legs, three as a body above, with a pair

for arms topped by the head. The twin tail had also divided itself, and each tail formed a gripping tentacle at the terminus of each arm.

Apparently as content in this new shape as in its former one, the *diccob* returned to its eating. Kirk wondered at the marvels of adaptive internal physiology which permitted such rapid dissolution and reforming without any evident harm or loss of efficiency to the animal.

"Amusing, is not?" bn Bem inquired.

" 'Fascinating' would be a better term," a thoroughly engrossed Spock suggested. "Is it capable of assuming more than two forms?"

"Watch," was all the commander said. Under his hand and voice directions, the *diccob* executed several more collapses and reassemblies, concluding with a fully circular shape which rolled spiritedly around the cage like an animated wheel, the cyclopean head tucked safely on the interior of the wheel.

"Some *diccobs*," bn Bem explained to his mesmerized audience, "only one or two new combinations can manage. Premier's *diccob* can do twenty nearly. Is prizewinner."

"I can imagine," McCoy said. "My stomach does flip-flops just watching it."

"Is the *diccob* the most flexible form of Pandronian life?" Spock inquired curiously, "or are there other native types equally adjustable?"

"Difficult to answer that question is," bn Bem began, his tone oddly thoughtful. "To understand, first you must know that on Pandro is—"

The commander's reply was interrupted by a soft chime. Everyone turned toward the direction of the sound.

One of the numerous doors on the other side of the room opened inward and two Pandronians entered the chamber. One appeared to be slightly younger than Commander bn Bem, while the other, judging from his movements and coloring, was of an advanced age. Touches of yellow had crept into his natural blue skin, and he walked toward them with the deliberate caution of the incipient infirm.

Commander bn Bem bowed before him as Kirk, Spock, and McCoy did their awkward best to imitate the gesture.

"I present the Supreme Integral of all Pandro," bn Bem announced grandiosely as he returned to an upright position, "Premier Kau afdel Kaun. This Other One I know not," he concluded in referring to the premier's companion.

"Greetings to you, bn Bem Commander. To you greetings also, Federation representatives, and thanks be for your returning the commander home," the premier said in a shaky voice. "For you back to be is good, Commander, though sorry This One is that your visit and study of Federation must interrupted so shockingly and suddenly be."

Despite his aged body, the premier spoke in English for the benefit of his alien guests, Kirk noted admiringly. There was no condescension in his voice, and neither was there the arrogance the captain had come to associate with Pandro: a result, Kirk decided, of the premier's long association with the missing Tam Paupa.

He began gesturing to the younger Pandronian at his side. "Be known to Lud eb Riss, Commander and visitors. Of the atrocity on us visited he will tell you. This One tires." On unsteady legs the premier mounted the dais and slumped into the chair behind the curved desk.

"At the wall here," the younger Pandronian indicated, leading them to a blank space near the dais. Depressing a segmented tile caused a large map to descend. It was filled with Pandronian glyphs which none of the Federation officers could read, but a two-dimensional map was difficult to misinterpret no matter what its origin. Kirk felt certain he could identify large cities, mountains, an ocean, and other features.

"Was stolen the Tam Paupa," eb Riss told them, "several"—and he uttered a term in Pandronian which was evidently untranslatable—"ago. Thus far to it recover all efforts failed have."

With a hand he indicated a large symbol in the approximate center of the map. "We know it is not in Tendrazin or in any of other cities secondary nearby. Still scoured are other major cities of Pandro being. Search and seizing of known elements criminal nothing has produced. All are outraged by theft of Tam Paupa too."

"That's surprising," McCoy commented. "Why should the theft of the Tam Paupa bother them?"

"History has shown that crime flourishes best under stable governments, Doctor."

"Even on Vulcan?"

"Such sociological aberrations, Doctor, are more typical of less advanced societies such as—"

"Spock, Bones," Kirk muttered a warning. Both men returned their attention to eb Riss as if nothing had been said.

The Pandronian's hand moved to encircle a huge shaded area near Tendrazin, which grew to encompass a considerable section of the map west of the capital city.

"Has never been fully explored this region," eb Riss explained for their benefit. "Development halted here at Tendrazin. In this vast area we suspected the *ibillters* who have defiled Pandro have the Tam Paupa taken." eb Riss turned to stare at them, but his gaze was concentrated principally on bn Bem.

"Is thought that none there can survive, yet investigators believe perpetrators of blasphemy there have fled. Explained can be, since *ibillters* probably insane are."

"To the *varbox* fled?" an appalled bn Bem gasped. "Mad are they for surely."

"Why surely?" Kirk wanted to know. "What is this *varbox*?"

"A region filled with wild integrals and integrators, so dense and swampish to enter there is to court death in fashions unimaginable and certain."

"One thing I still don't understand," Kirk continued. "How can your capital city be built so close to a dangerous, unexplored wilderness?"

"Much of Pandro unexplored is, Outworlder," eb Riss snorted with typical Pandronian contempt. "You comprehend not."

"We admit we know very little of Pandro," Spock confessed. "We would like to know more. When formal association between Pandro and the Federation takes place, we—"

"*If* takes place," eb Riss snapped brusquely. "I explain simple for you. Are surrounded most of our cities by largely

untraveled jungle wildernesses. Is due to nature of Pandronian biology. Is no such thing as Pandronian science of biology."

McCoy almost smiled. "Now, simple or not, that's impossible."

"Listen clear, McCoy Doctor," bn Bem advised him. "Are constantly changing, Pandronian lifeforms. Most shapes unstable and ever altering, like *diccob* without training. A few integrators like ourselves"—he indicated his own body and its three independent sections—"discovered long ago that to stay in permanent association was benefit to all parts. Others have likewise evolved.

"But for rest of much of Pandro life, existence is struggling continual to find satisfying combination of sections. So is ever changing much of Pandro zoology, and some plant life as well. How can one classify species which exist a few days only?"

"I see," Spock murmured. "Pandro's ecology is unstable. I assume, Commander, that such steady mutations are limited to the higher forms of life?"

"They'd have to be, Spock," McCoy pointed out.

"Is true," bn Bem confirmed, "or otherwise ever altering diseases, bacteriums and virus forms, would all Pandro life have wiped out long ago. But forms microscopic constant are. Permanent integrators like self can build resistance to others."

"Is why," eb Riss put in, "all Pandronian cities and towns with history have old fortress walls around them, built by ancestors to hold out dangerously changing jungle lifes."

"What I still don't understand," muttered McCoy, "is why anyone would want to steal your Tam Paupa. If even the criminal elements have an investment in keeping it where it belongs, who does that leave as a potential thief?"

"Would only we know that ourselves, outworlder," came the sad voice of Premier afdel Kaun from behind the great desk. "Unheard of is this thing." He winced and both hands went to the sides of his head. "Is certain one thing only: Unless Tam Paupa soon recovered is, This One will lose ability to make sound objective decisions."

The supreme ruler of Pandro assumed a woeful expression. "Is certain. Can feel already This One divisiveness and

personal opinions entering mind. At same time slips away slow and steady the intelligence needed to govern Pandro. Is terrible helpless this feeling."

"We must Tam Paupa recover, Kirk Captain," an anxious bn Bem added. "Or Pandro society sinks again into mindless raging against self." The commander drew himself up. "Have done what of you was asked, Kirk Captain, in bringing This One home. To you and your government goes thanks of planet Pandro."

Spock leaned over and whispered to Kirk, "Remember, Captain, our opportunity to gain a decisive march on the Klingons by ingratiating ourselves forever in the minds of the Pandronians."

"I haven't forgotten, Mr. Spock," the captain replied. He faced the raised desk and directed his words to the premier. "Perhaps a new approach, or the benefit of outside thought processes, would be of some help to you, sir."

"Yourselves explain," afdel Kaun implored.

"Well," Kirk continued, "from what we've learned so far, we know that Pandronian science is far advanced in certain fields. Yet the Federation is more advanced in others. We're not afraid of the *varbox*."

"Bravery of ignorance," snorted eb Riss, but Kirk ignored him and pressed on.

"We have certain weapons in our possession, unknown on Pandro, which would be of much help in making one's way through the jungle you fear so strongly."

"Is true," bn Bem confirmed.

"Enough intelligence I retain to know that to accept your offer of aid is wiseness," the premier said solemnly. "How soon can you join expedition into *varbox*?"

"Inside an hour," Kirk replied quickly. "We'd like to return to our ship briefly to outfit ourselves properly for the journey, and also to obtain heavier weaponry. We'll need something more than hand phasers if the inhabitants of this jungle are as intimidating as you make them sound."

"Danger lies in not knowing what one may confront, Kirk Captain," bn Bem told him. "Time we will save if you beam back down into *zintar* yards."

"Whatever you say, Commander," Kirk replied, not bothering to inquire as to what a *zintar* yard might be. They would know soon enough. He flipped open his communicator as Spock noted a new set of coordinates.

"Kirk to *Enterprise*."

"*Enterprise*—Scott here, Captain."

"Beam us up, Mr. Scott, and stand by the transporter. We'll be coming back down shortly."

"Aye, Captain." A pause, then, "Back down, Captain?"

"That's right, Scotty. It looks like we're going to see more of Pandro than we originally thought . . ."

V

After drawing jungle fatigues, appropriate survival equipment, and type-two mounts for their hand phasers, the three officers beamed down to the surface of Pandro once again.

A *zintar* yard turned out to be an enormous stable, although Kirk was reminded more of a repair yard for large shuttlecraft. Rank on rank of the huge, barnlike metal sheds were arranged alongside one another before a broad sward of green growth, cut short like grass.

Each long metal cell contained a sinuous reptilian creature which was a near analog of the ancient, idealized Terran Chinese dragon. But these were covered with gray, brown, and green fur.

"Like my own people," bn Bem informed them, "has found the *zintar* a combination of integrals advantageous to maintain. Advantageous to us as well." The commander introduced them to a tall, swarthy-looking Pandronian who sported short whiskers and managed to look like the Pandronian equivalent of a pirate.

"This is ab Af, who will our *zintar* in charge of be." ab Af made a curt gesture indicative more of a being interested in minding his own business than of standard Pandronian arrogance.

"eb Riss and six others will arrive to join soon," bn Bem continued. "They a third *zintar* will ride, while will a second supplies carry. *Zintar* is only creature by us tamed which not afraid of forest. Better than machine. *Zintar* runs off other Pandronian life and will not break down. Very little there is that a *zintar* is afraid of."

"I can believe that," Kirk agreed, staring up at the weaving, bobbing dragon-head of the forty-meter-long creature. It yawned elaborately, displaying thin, needlelike teeth in front and flat grinders behind. Four spikes or stiff whiskers—Kirk couldn't decide which—dangled from the front corners of upper and lower jaws.

bn Bem directed them to step aside as ab Af urged the monster out of its stable. The handler utilized verbal commands and prods from a small charged metal tube.

Kirk noticed the wide saddles set between protruding vertebrae on the creature's back even as bn Bem asked, "If all are ready, Kirk Captain?"

McCoy ran a hand through his hair as he examined the attenuated apparition. "I don't know if all are," was his comment, "but as long as I'm not expected to feed one of these oversized horned toads, I guess I'll give it a try."

"Good is, McCoy Doctor," bn Bem complimented him. He barked something in Pandronian to ab Af. The handler stood to one side of the swaying skull, touched the *zintar* between the front legs, and shouted a command.

Docile as a dog, the six-legged colossus appeared to collapse in on itself. Its short, stumpy legs never moved, but the central body slumped to the ground between them, like a ship being lowered between six hydraulic lifts. Its stomach scraped the dirt.

"Intriguing arrangement of ligaments and muscles," was Spock's observation at this unexpected physiological maneuver. "Both appear to be extraordinarily flexible." Using the thick fur for handholds, the first officer mounted one of the Pandronian saddles notched into the animal's backbone and seated himself as best he could. Kirk and McCoy followed, the captain envying the ease with which eb Riss and his six armed followers mounted their *zintar* nearby.

Once everyone was properly seated—Kirk felt "aboard" would be a better term to describe mounting a creature this size—ab Af uttered another command. Kirk felt himself rising, a sensation not unlike that produced in one of the *Enterprise*'s turbolifts, as the *zintar* raised its body between its legs again.

Then they were on their way, moving at a surprisingly rapid pace through the wide streets of Tendrazin. McCoy had started in surprise when the *zintar* began to move. The movements beneath him were unique. It was a peculiar—but not necessarily uncomfortable—sensation, he reflected. Had he ever ridden a large camel, the motion would have been somewhat more familiar to him.

Before Kirk had gotten his fill of the fascinating architecture around them—a curious and exciting mixture of archaic and ultramodern—they had passed through a very old, heavily guarded gate in the ancient city wall and were traveling steadily across a broad open plain.

"Many of our crops," bn Bem lectured them from his position just behind ab Af, "are grown within old city walls, to protect the cultivators from incursions by wild Pandronian lifes. Space here and around most cities are clear kept for reason the same, Kirk Captain."

"We are obviously headed on some predetermined course," Spock commented from two places behind Kirk. "Why this way? I thought you said you didn't have any idea where the thieves had fled, except into the very large area you called the *varbox*."

"Are going that way now," bn Bem replied. "Have tried all sources in cities. Was one noncity theory which implicated *varbox*, but could not get Pandronians to try until you your weapons aid offered." His voice turned conspiratorial.

"Several citizens of Tendrazin home returning from fraternal meeting one night reported encountering large group of nervous-seeming Pandronians leaving city by gate now behind us. Suspicious Ones were on *coryats* mounted. One citizen asked destination and Nervous One replied his group to Cashua going. Cashua a medium-sized city several hundred *laggets* to northeast of Tendrazin."

"What's so suspicious about people going from one city to another?" McCoy wanted to know.

"Not where—when," bn Bem told him. "No One travels at night near forests on Pandro if not in armored vehicles. Also, *coryats* good forest walkers, if protected well.

"Only recently this report checked in detail," the commander continued. "Was found that time necessary to travel between Tendrazin and Cashua, even allowing for reasonable delays, should have shown travelers there within four *daams*. No party on *coryats*, or of similar number to that reported by citizens, ever seen arriving at Cashua or other nearby cities. Party not sighted by aerial surveyests.

"So ground from Tendrazin outward hunted for clues. Many tracks of vehicles and animals near city, but few near forest. Found prints of *coryats* entering forest. Entering forest *there*," and he pointed ahead of them, to a slight break in the marching ranks of green and brown.

"Is old hunter trail, one of many," he went on. "No other trail show signs of *coryat* passage. May not be significant. Many Pandronians enter jungle on own, some for reasons legal not. Few return after long stay. Maybe these not wish to return.

"Is lucky dry season this is. If they did enter forest here, *coryat* tracks will remain."

In a short while the *zintars* slowed, approaching the first fringe of jungle. A small group of soldiers was waiting to greet them, eb Riss's *zintar* did the body-slumping trick and eb Riss dismounted to confer with one of the soldiers, apparently an officer. There was a short, animated discussion during which both Pandronians studied something on the ground out of Kirk's vision. He could imagine what the subject of their conversation was: the *coryat* tracks, which these troops had doubtlessly been placed here to protect against destruction—intentional or otherwise.

eb Riss confirmed Kirk's suspicions when he passed by them on the way back to his own *zintar*. "Tracks remain still," he called up to them. "Party of six to twelve entered the *varbox* here. Is more than first guessed. Too large surely it is for a larking group."

"True that is," agreed bn Bem, while Kirk and the others wondered at the purpose of a larking party. "On our way to hurry."

eb Riss gestured confirmation and trotted back to scramble monkeylike up the leg of his *zintar*. The expedition plunged into the forest.

Immediately the usefulness of the *zintar* in such terrain manifested itself. Not only did the creature's size intimidate and frighten off potential attackers, but its bulk shouldered aside or smashed over much vegetation, some of which was dense enough to impede the progress of any ground vehicle. The *Enterprise*'s heavy groundcraft could have done as well, but not nearly at such a pace.

Kirk mentioned his opinion as he continued to study the uneven, swampy ground below, which was thickly-overgrown with alien roots and climbers. And this was supposed to be a trail!

"I can see why the Pandronians prefer organic to mechanical transportation, Spock."

"Indeed, Captain," the first officer agreed, eyeing a particularly wicked-looking cluster of thorny vines which the *zintar* simply strode through without apparent ill effects. "Even a powerful landcraft would sacrifice mobility for movement here. And there is also the matter of logistics. It is evident that the *zintars* can live well off the land."

They were many hours into the jungle when the head tracker shouted back to them from his position on eb Riss's mount. Handlers halted their *zintars* while the Pandronian scrambled down one postlike leg and examined the ground. He gestured and babbled until several other troopers dismounted and followed him into the dense underbrush to one side of the forest path. The greenery swallowed them up quickly.

bn Bem and eb Riss started to show signs of nervousness when the tracking party failed to call out or return some minutes later. The two officers were about to order the *zintars* into off-trail pursuit in search of their vanished comrades when the little group reappeared.

The head tracker looked disheveled and tired, but the excitement was evident in his face. He walked to stand below eb Riss, began talking rapidly and with many gestures.

"The tracker says," bn Bem translated for them as the discussion progressed, "that a small but definite animal path within lies. Is evidence also of *coryats* passing. Age of tracks," and now the commander was hard pressed to restrain his own enthusiasm, "is proper to correspond with time suspicious party was noted leaving Tendrazin. Is further confirmation to clinch in tracker's hand."

Kirk leaned as far to his right as he dared, squinting. The slim tracker was waving what looked from this distance to be a torn bit of black fabric. At bn Bem's request, the incriminating cloth was passed up to him. A brief inspection

and then he was conferring with eb Riss in Pandronian while Kirk, Spock, and McCoy waited tensely for information.

eb Riss's *zintar* handler shouted and tapped his mount on its shoulder with the charged tube. One by one the three great creatures turned like seagoing ships to bull their way into the growths on their right. After a short walk the dense brush thinned somewhat, enough for Kirk and the others to see that they were truly traveling down a cleared and marked trail. It wasn't as broad or well used as the hunter's path they had entered the forest by, but a path it was.

bn Bem turned in his saddle, passed the bit of black material back to Kirk. His face looked grim. "Is first possible explanation to part of puzzlings, Kirk Captain. Now things become clear a little maybe."

"It's just a rag to me," Kirk told him, turning to pass it back to Spock. "Where's the significance for you?"

"A popular color on Pandro black is not, Captain. May again mean nothing. Is little to be gained by to conclusions hopping, but still . . ."

"But still—" Kirk prompted.

"Is on Pandro," the commander explained, "a small society of"—he paused for a second, hunting for a proper translation—"best I can come is physiological anarchists. They believe that holding integration to form perpetuating species is against natural orders. Would have all Pandro lifes, including This One, return to separate integrators and recombine as do wild forms. Mad Ones believe better integration than present developers of Pandronian civilization will eventually result.

"Very young and stupid most of them are. But they believe strongly in their madness, Kirk Captain. Have been troublesome in few incidents past, but not really dangerous. Is conceivable they could react violent enough against Pandronian heritages to perform heinous deed like theft of Tam Paupa. If any Pandronians could, would be them for sure.

"Part of their belief is to wear heavy black clothing, as if to hide the shame of their integration from universe."

"I take it the Tam Paupa was always well guarded," Spock said.

"Well guarded truly, Spock Commander," concurred bn Bem.

"I am puzzled, then," the first officer confessed, "as to how a small coterie of mildly annoying revolutionaries could suddenly jump from being youthfully irksome to executing a deed as elaborate as the Tam Paupa's theft."

"Agree wholesomely—no, wholeheartedly," bn Bem replied after a moment's consideration. "Is most strangeness. Would indeed not give group credit for such talents." He performed the Pandronian equivalent of a shrug.

"May be more than anarchist types after all. Into place pieces beginning to assemble. Still is missing important integers."

Kirk, Spock, and McCoy could only agree.

An urgent beep sounded in the Main Transporter Room on board the *Enterprise*. Transporter Chief Kyle stared blankly at it for a moment, then moved quickly to the console intercom when the beep was repeated.

"Transporter Room to bridge, Engineer Kyle speaking."

"Chief Scott here. What is it, Mr. Kyle?"

The engineer waited until a third beep confirmed the previous message and reported, "Sir, I'm receiving a direct nonverbal emergency signal from the surface on personal communicator frequency. There seems to be," and he hurriedly checked two readouts, "sufficient strength to indicate that the signal is being generated simultaneously by two—no, by three communicators."

A short pause, then, "It must be the captain, Mr. Spock, and Dr. McCoy, though I canna imagine why they're usin' nonverbal signalin'. They can tell us soon. Home in on them and stand by to beam 'em up, Mr. Kyle. We'll find out what happened soon enough."

On the bridge Scott turned to face Communications. "Lieutenant Uhura?"

"Mr. Scott?" the communications officer replied.

"See if you can raise any of the landin' party and get an explanation of what the trouble is."

"Yes, sir." Uhura turned back to her instruments and rapidly manipulated controls. She glanced back concernedly seconds

later.

"No response, sir."

"Verra well." He directed his words to the command chair pickup again. "Beam 'em up quickly, Mr. Kyle."

"Aye, aye, Mr. Scott."

"Rematerialize slow as you safely can. I'm coming down." He rose from the chair. "Lieutenant Uhura, you're in command until I return with the captain."

"Very well, sir." As a precaution, she buzzed for Lieutenant M'ress to come on duty, on the unlikely chance that she would have to vacate Communications and take up position at the command station. Safety procedures were good to keep up, even if certain key personnel lost a little sleep in the process.

Moving at maximum speed, Scott entered the Transporter Room even as Kyle was bringing up the crucial levers.

"They're coming in now, Chief," the engineer indicated, sparing the approaching officer the briefest of glances.

"Carry on, Mr. Kyle."

Three forms slowly solidified, began to assume definite outlines in the transporter alcove. The last flickers of transporter energy were dying away as Scott charged reflexly for the alarm switch.

The paralysis beam projected by one of the forms standing in the alcove caught the chief engineer just above the knees. With a desperate twist and lunge, Scott was just able to fall forward far enough to slap a hand down on the red control.

Klaxons commenced sounding all over the *Enterprise*. On the bridge, Uhura declared a general alert, then activated the command chair intercom.

"Transporter Room—Chief Scott, Mr. Kyle, what's happening down there?"

Kyle fought to reply even as he was dodging immobilizing beams from behind the shielding bulk of the console. Scott fought to pull himself out of the line of fire using only his hands.

"I don't know!" the transporter engineer shouted toward the intercom pickup. "Chief Scott's been hurt." The three

things in the alcove were rushing toward him, firing as they came. "Three boarders, bipedal, type un—"

Transmission from the Transporter Room ceased abruptly.

"Engineer Kyle—report," Uhura yelled into the intercom. "Report!" The intercom gave back a steady slight hiss—and faint sounds as of something not human moving about the chamber. She turned, spoke decisively to where a now wide-awake M'ress sat ready at the controls.

"Lieutenant, contact all security stations. Seal off the entire deck around the Main Transporter Room and have security personnel close in."

"Yes, sirr," M'ress acknowledged without thinking. "What arre they to look forr?"

"Three invaders, bipedal in form. Beyond that, your guess is as good as mine. Whatever they are, they've injured both Chief Scott and Mr. Kyle. Warn Nurse Chapel to stand by for casualties and to alert backup medical personnel."

Uhura turned to face the helm as M'ress relayed her orders through the ship. "Mr. Arex, maintain orbit and begin attempts to contact the landing party. Mr. Sulu?"

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Take over security operations. You will personally assume charge of the rescue of Chief Scott and Mr. Kyle."

Sulu was out of his chair and heading for the turbolift. Uhura watched him leave, wishing she could go in his place. But she had been left in command, and personal reasons were no reasons for altering orders—especially in an emergency situation. But, she thought furiously, if the three who had beamed up weren't the captain, Mr. Spock, and Dr. McCoy, then who were they? More important, why weren't the *Enterprise* crew members responding from Pandro?

In the Transporter Room below, Scott rolled over onto his back and pushed himself to a sitting position against a wall. Kyle, he saw, had been completely paralyzed by the strange weapon which had so far only affected the chief engineer from the waist down. Around him the general alert continued to sound, but it didn't appear to panic or otherwise affect the three figures standing over Kyle and conferring among themselves.

Each was clad in a long black robe. Black hoods covered their heads. At the same time as Scott recognized their chatter as Pandronian they flipped their hoods back and began to disrobe. They were Pandronians, all right.

Somewhat to the chiefs surprise, Commander Ari bn Bem wasn't in the group. He was glad of that. Had bn Bem been one of the belligerent boarders, it would have meant that the captain and the others were in serious trouble below. They still might be, but the wild-eyed, disorganized appearance of these three gave Scott some hope that at least the Pandronian government wasn't involved.

But if that was the case, how had these creatures managed to board the *Enterprise* so neatly?

All were sullen and grim-faced. One pointed at Scott, then jabbered at his companions. A second replied curtly and they bent to examine Engineer Kyle.

Scott ground his teeth in frustration and anger as they roughly turned the body over. With relief Scott saw that Kyle's eyes were open and functioning, even if the rest of his body was frozen into immobility.

Further discussion in the alien tongue and suddenly the three Pandronians became nine. Each split into its three component parts while Scott gaped. He knew of the Pandronian ability from the report of what had transpired on Delta Theta Three, but this was the first time he had actually seen the process in action—not to mention in triplicate.

Each section grasped a sidearm in various hands, toes, or cilia, and the three heads, three torsos, and three lower bodies ambled out the Transporter Room door. As it shut behind them, Scott moved, fighting to drag himself toward the intercom.

He had no idea what the Pandronians were up to other than that it was inimical to the good health of the ship and its crew. And, he realized with a start, he had reported three of them. Without knowing that the invaders were Pandronians, Uhura and everyone else would be hunting for only three shapes, leaving six sections to stroll freely about the ship.

Hopefully they would be detected as sections of mature Pandronians, but Scott had no intention of leaving that

identification to others. Despite the fact that the paralysis seemed to grow worse the more he moved, he continued hunching and pulling himself across the deck. The tingling numbness had reached his waist by the time he reached the console.

Exhausted by the effort, he started to shout. The intercom should still be open, since the Pandronians hadn't bothered to shut it off. If so, the directional pickup should gather and transmit his voice.

But the tinging moved rapidly now, creeping eerily up his arms and chest and into his throat. He couldn't operate his voice. Screaming furiously with his eyes, he slumped to the deck, falling across the legs of the motionless transporter engineer and rolling slightly to one side.

Apparently the paralysis left the higher functions unimpaired, for Scott found he could still see and hear, could still think clearly. Moving his eyes, he saw Kyle staring helplessly back at him. With silent glances the two men managed to communicate a wealth of emotions to each other. Not least was a mutual anger at their inability to warn the rest of the ship as to the nature of their attackers.

A patrol of three security personnel was first to spot the invaders. Phasers set on stun, they exchanged fire with the unrecognized antagonists. Incredibly agile and too small to hit easily, the aliens slipped away.

But now the crew knew what they were up against, for the ensign in charge had recognized the similarity of the sectioned creatures to a former passenger.

"Pandronians!" Uhura exclaimed. "I don't understand." She leaned a little closer to the pickup to make certain she heard correctly. "Was Commander Ari bn Bem, our former visitor, among those firing back at you?"

"It's impossible to say, Lieutenant," came the reply from the security officer. "But from the pictures we were shown of him and from the couple of times I myself met him in corridors, I don't think so. Of course, there's no way to tell, and they were all split up in parts. Nine parts. I guess they could even be in disguise."

"Thank you, Ensign," Uhura acknowledged. "Keep your phasers set on stun. They haven't killed anyone yet. If they do," she added warningly, "appropriate orders will be forthcoming."

She clicked off, turned to Communications. "Lieutenant M'ress, keep trying to contact the landing party."

"I'm doing so, Lieutenant Uhurra, but therre seems to be some kind of interrferrence."

"Natural or artificial?" Uhura demanded to know.

"I don't know yet, Lieutenant. Without detailed inforrmation on Pandrro, it is difficult to say." She turned back to her instruments, leaving Uhura frustrated and unsatisfied, but helpless to do more than wait.

The squad that had originally spotted the invaders turned down a corridor. Three dim shapes could be seen scuttling around a far bend.

"There they are!" the ensign in charge yelled. "Come on!"

Phasers at the ready, the two men and one woman rushed down the corridor. Each got halfway to the turn the three shapes had vanished behind when they grabbed at midsection or head, tumbling one after another to the deck.

Three sets of arms and chests slipped out of a crevice to inspect the motionless shapes lying on the metal flooring. Two lower torsos with heads set incongruously in their middles came around the corridor bend they had previously turned. The heads jumped off the hips, made room for the middle torsos and arms, which then picked the heads up and set them on their respective shoulders.

Thus reassembled, the three Pandronians started back up the corridor the way the security team had come.

VI

The *zintars* continued to make rapid progress through the forest. Kirk, Spock, and McCoy used the deceptively tranquil ride to marvel at the incredible diversity of life around them. Such abundance of forms was only natural in a world of constantly changing species, where an entire genus might consist of only one creature. And that creature might choose to annihilate itself and its place in any textbook of Pandronian biology by freely dissolving into its multiple components, or integrals.

These endlessly variable animals were in never-ceasing competition to create a form more successful, better able to compete, than the next. The steady flux led to a number of forms bizarre beyond belief, forms which—bn Bem told them—rarely lasted out a day or more before the component integrals realized their own absurdity.

They saw tiny mouse-sized creatures with enormous heads and pincushion mouths full of teeth, impressive but impractical on creatures so small. Massive armored bodies teetered precariously on the lithe limbs of running herbivores. Tall bipedal trunks armed with clawed arms and legs ended in bovine faces filled with flat molars suitable for mashing only the softest of vegetable matter.

"Such extreme mismatches ludicrous are, Kirk Captain," the commander pointed out. "Outlandish shapes continue to join, though, brief as they may last. So fierce is the compulsion new forms to create."

"How many possible combinations are there?" asked a thoroughly engrossed McCoy. "How many varieties of hands and legs, torsos and heads, trunks and so on exist?"

bn Bem looked dolefully back at him. "No one knows, McCoy Doctor. Have been already cataloged many hundreds of thousands of shapes and millions of integrals. Sometimes cataloged ones vanish and new ones take their place. Is impossible job which never ends."

"I see," an impressed McCoy replied. "How often does a new successful form, like yourself or the *diccob* or *zintar* evolve?"

"Cannot give figure," bn Bem responded, "but is rare occurence. About forty percent Pandronian lifes maintain permanent association and reproduce same form. All can break down, though, if such is natural willing, but this is very rare. Cannot tell what will find next."

The officers were soon to discover the truth of the commander's concluding statement. The group made camp in a partial clearing on a slight rise of ground. Gentle though the rise was, it placed them high enough above the surrounding terrain to provide reasonably dry footing.

Kirk studied their surroundings. Only the different colors and designs of the encircling vegetation, the peculiar alien cries filling the evening air, made this jungle any different from half a hundred others he had visited or read about, including those of Earth itself.

To the south, the Pandronian sun was slowly sinking. It was slightly larger and redder than Sol, a touch hotter as well. The three massive *zintars* were bedded away from the camp, where they made their own clearing by simply walking in tighter and tighter circles until trampled vegetation formed a soft bed underneath. Well trained, they were left by themselves, their handlers secure in the knowledge that nothing known would risk attacking them.

eb Riss and his men unpacked supplies from the third pseudodragon, taking care not to tangle lines in the creature's fur. They produced several oddly shaped, roughly globular tents and some equally odd foot stores, which bn Bem assured Spock he and the others could eat. Had he not partaken with reasonable satisfaction of food on board the *Enterprise*?

The bonfire the troops raised in the middle of the encampment was the only familiar thing around, and McCoy in particular was glad for its cheery crackle and sputter.

"You can always count on the familiarity of a fire," he pointed out to his companions, "no matter what kind of world you're on."

"That is not necessarily true, Doctor," Spock mused. "Depending both on the nature of the atmosphere in question and the combustible materials employed, a fire could be—"

"Never mind," McCoy advised with a sigh. "Sorry I mentioned it, Spock."

A heavy mist closed in around them as the sun dropped lower in the sky. The nature of the yelps and squeeps from the surrounding jungle changed slightly as the creatures of the day faded into their holes and boles and the inhabitants of dark gradually awoke.

"I can see," Kirk found himself musing conversationally to bn Bem, "how Pandronians could develop a feeling of superiority to other races."

"A conceit to be deplored," the reformed commander responded.

"No, it's true," Kirk insisted. "You're not to be blamed, I think, for such an attitude. You live on a world of constant change. Coping with such change is an incredible racial feat. You have reason to have developed considerable pride."

"Is so," bn Bem was unable to refrain from concurring.

Their conversation was shattered by a violent yet muffled howl from the depths of the forest.

"What was that?" McCoy blurted.

"Is no telling, McCoy Doctor," bn Bem reminded him, eyeing the surrounding trees appraisingly. "Is as your saying, as good as mine is your guess."

"Generally," Spock ventured, striving to see through the opaque wall of emerald, "those creatures which make the loudest noises do so because they have no fear of calling attention to themselves. That roar was particularly uninhibited."

As if to back up Spock's evaluation, the howl sounded again, louder, closer.

"I believe," the first officer said slowly, "it would be advisable to concoct some kind of defense. Whatever is producing that roar seems to be moving toward us."

"Is not necessarily true," bn Bem argued. "Strange vocal organs of Pandronian lifes can—"

Something not quite the size of a shuttlecraft rose like a purple moon in the almost dark, towering out of the underbrush. It bellowed thunderously, took a step toward the camp—and stopped. It had encountered a pair of huge trees too close together for it to pass between. It hammered with massive limbs at the trees, shrieking its outrage.

Fortunately, Kirk thought as he retreated toward the bonfire in the center of the camp, the components which had combined to compose this creature had not included more than the absolute minimum of brains.

The creature snarled and howled at the tiny running shapes so close before it while continuing to try to force its way between the two trees. It could have backed off, taken several ponderous steps to either side on its five pairs of scaly legs, and charged the camp unimpeded. Thankfully, it obstinately continued battering at the stolid trees.

Kirk watched as the Pandronians struggled to set up a large complex device. It consisted of several shiny, featureless metal boxes arranged in seemingly random order. A long, rather childish-looking muzzle projected from one end of the collage and various controls from the other.

By now the thought had penetrated the attacking abomination's peanut mind that to go around might be more efficient than trying to go through. Backing up like a lumbering earth mover going into reverse, the creature moved to one side of the right-hand tree and started forward again.

Only its slowness allowed Kirk and his companions a measure of confidence. Kirk felt he could easily outrun the thing, but would prefer not to have to try. Spock was regarding the still-frantic Pandronians, and he concluded aloud, "It seems our friends were not expecting an assault of this size. I suggest, Captain, that to preserve the camp and supplies we disregard the egos of our hosts and restrain it ourselves."

McCoy already had his phaser out and was holding it aimed on the unbelievably slow carnivore. It showed a mouth lined with short saw-edged teeth. The cavity was wide and deep enough for a man to walk around in without stooping. Four eyes set in a neat row near the crest of the skull peered down at them dumbly, crimson in the glow of the campfire.

Nonetheless, McCoy wasn't impressed. "How can any meat-eater that slow expect to catch any prey? It's got to be an unstable form."

"True, Bones," Kirk acknowledged, "but if we don't stop it, it's going to make a mess of the camp."

"Maybe if we rubbed its tummy it would calm down a little," the doctor suggested.

Spock looked uncertain at the suggestion. "An interesting notion, Doctor. How do you propose we convince the creature to turn onto its back?"

"Don't look at me, Spock," McCoy responded innocently. "I just make up the prescription. I don't make the patient take it."

"I think something more convincing is in order, Bones," Kirk decided as the creature neared the first of the tents. "On command, fire."

Three beams brightened a small portion of the night. They struck the creature, one hitting the side of the skull near the neck, the other two touching higher up near the waving dorsal spines.

Letting out a hideous yowl, the monster halted. Two front feet rose off the ground, and the nightmare head jerked convulsively to one side. The creature shook off the effects, took another half tread forward.

"Again, *fire!*" Kirk ordered.

Once more the phaser beams struck; once again the effects were only temporary.

"Aim for the head," Kirk ordered, frowning at their inability to injure or even to turn the monster.

"Captain, we don't even know if that's where its integral brain is located," declared Spock, who shouted to make himself heard above the creature's snuffling and yowling.

"Why don't you ask it?" McCoy suggested as he tried to focus on one of the four pupils high above.

Spock frowned. "The creature does not appear capable of communication at the higher levels, Doctor." He fired and ducked backward as the head, making a sound like two steel plates crashing together, snapped in his direction.

But by now the Pandronians had assembled themselves behind their funny-looking little wheeled device. All at once there was a soft thud from the muzzle and something erupted from its circular tip.

Several hundred tiny needles struck the creature, distributed across its body. The creature took another step forward, the head almost within range of a quickly retreating Kirk, and then it stopped. All four eyes blinked sequentially; a second time. A high mewling sound began to issue from the beast, incongruously pitiful in so threatening a shape.

Then it started coming apart like a child's toy. Various segments—legs, tail parts, and pieces of skull—dropped off, each running madly in different directions, until the entire apparition had scattered itself into the jungle.

"That's quite a device," McCoy commented, impressed. He walked over to study the machine. It no longer looked funny. "What does it do?"

"Is difficult, McCoy Doctor," the Pandronian commander explained, "to kill a creature whose individual integrals retain life independent. Would have to kill each integral separately.

"This," and he indicated the weapon, "fires tiny syringes, each of which a chemical contains which makes mutual association abhorrent to creature's integrals. Is very effective." He gestured at the forest wall.

"Attacking carnivore integration suddenly found its components incompatible with one another. All broke free and fled themselves. Will not for a long time recombine because of lasting effects of the drug."

"I offer apologies," a new voice said. Kirk turned, saw a distraught eb Riss approaching them. "We did not an assault by so large a meat-eater expect, Kirk Captain. Was oversight in camp preparations on my part. Sorrowful I am."

"Forget it," advised Kirk.

"To produce a carnivore so large." eb Riss continued, "requires an unusually large number of integrators. The *fasir*," and he indicated the device that had fired the hypodermic darts, "is not ordinarily prepared so large a dose to deliver. And the first time we certain had to be dose was large enough

to disassemble creature, or half of it might have continued attack we could not stop in time."

"An interesting method of fighting an unusual and unpredictable opponent," observed Spock with appreciation. "It would be interesting to consider if such a drug could be effectively employed against non-Pandronian life forms. The fighting ability of another person, for example, would be severely impaired if his arms and legs could be induced to run in different directions. And if the parts could later be made to recombine, then a battle might be won without any permanent harm being done. There remains the question of psychological harm, however. If one were to literally lose one's head, for example . . ."

Mercifully, Kirk thought, McCoy said nothing.

"Is strange, though," bn Bem commented as he studied the forest, "to find so large a carnivore here. Far though we be, is still close for one so large to Tendrazin."

McCoy gestured at the jungle. "Do you think maybe it has a mate out there?"

Both bn Bem and eb Riss favored the doctor with a confused expression. "A mate? Ah!" bn Bem exclaimed, showing understanding. "Is evident you have no knowledge of Pandronian reproduction methods. Can become very complicated with multiple integrated beings. When we have year or two together will This One be pleased to explain Pandronian reproductive systems."

"Thanks," McCoy responded drily. "We'll pass on it for now."

"Any word on the whereabouts of the Pandronian boarders, Lieutenant?" Uhura inquired of M'ress.

"Nothing," came the prompt reply. Abruptly the communications officer placed a hand over the receiver in one fuzz-fringed ear. "Just a moment. Casualty rreport coming in."

Uhura's fingers tightened on the arms of the command chair.

"One securrity patrrol incapacitated—thrree total."

"How bad?" came the unwanted but unavoidable next question.

"They appearr to be subject to some forrm of muscularr parralysis. It is selective in that it does not affect the involuntarry musculaturre, perrmitting vital functions to continue." Something on the board above the console beeped for attention, and M'ress rushed to acknowledge.

"Anotherr rreporrt, frrom Sick Bay this time. Trransporrterr Chief Kyle and Lieutenant Commanderr Scott have been similarrly affected. Commanderr Scott has been only parrtially affected, it appearrs. He is waiting to talk to you now."

"Put him through," she snapped. "Mr. Scott?"

"I'm okay, Lieutenant Uhura."

"We know its Pandronians. What happened?"

"They came through as I was enterin' the Transporter Room. Surprise was total. They used some kind of hand weapon that puts your whole body to sleep—everything but your insides. I dinna know what they're up to, but there is one thing I do want to know—verra badly, lass."

"I'm thinking the same thing, Mr. Scott." She could almost hear him nod his agreement.

"Aye . . . How did they know what frequency to simulate to convince us it was the captain and the others who wanted to be beamed back aboard?" There was a pause, then the chief engineer continued in a more speculative tone.

"The only thing I can think of is that they've taken the captain, Mr. Spock, and Dr. McCoy prisoner and learned or knew in advance how to broadcast the emergency signal."

A lighter but no less serious voice sounded over the communicator. "Now, you just lie down. Mr. Scott, and no more *but*'s, *if*'s, or *maybe*'s about it."

"Who's that?" Uhura inquired.

"Nurse Chapel here, Lieutenant," came the reply. "The paralysis shows no signs of worsening or spreading in any way which would threaten life functions. But I've four and a half cases in here, counting Mr. Scott as partly recovered. None of the others show any indication of similar recovery yet. I don't want to put any strain on anyone's system." She added, obviously for Scott's benefit. "No matter how well they're feeling."

"I agree absolutely," Uhura declared. "Let me know when anyone's condition changes—for better or worse."

"Will do, Lieutenant."

"Bridge out." Uhura turned back to stare thoughtfully at the communications station. Her gaze did not fall on the busy M'ress, who was striving to coordinate the flow of security reports from around the ship, but went past her.

How *had* the Pandronians known what signal to duplicate? And how had they managed to do it? Was Scott right? Had the captain and the others been captured? Or was there another, as yet unforseeable explanation?

An excited yelp came from Communications, a cross between a growl and a shout.

"Take it easy, Lieutenant M'ress," Uhura advised. "What is it?"

"I have contact with the landing parrty. Lieutenant!" she replied gleefully. "It's weak, but coming thrrough."

Uhura was hard pressed to keep her own enthusiasm in check. "Put them through."

There was a beep, followed by a burst of white noise. Exotic sounds drifted over the bridge speakers, but Uhura didn't relax even when she heard a familiar, if distorted and slightly puzzled, voice.

"Kirk here," the badly garbled acknowledgment came. "What's the trouble, Mr. Scott?"

"Mr. Scott has been injured, Captain," she said quickly. "This is Lieutenant Uhura, acting in command."

"Scotty hurt?" came the cry of disbelief. "What's going on up there, Lieutenant? Report in full."

"We've been boarded, Captain. By Pandronians—three of them." She hesitated, then asked, "Are you sure you're speaking freely? If you can't, try to give me some sort of sign."

There was a long pause and everyone on the bridge could hear Kirk discussing the incredible situation with someone else. A new voice sounded.

"Spock here. We are perfectly all right, Lieutenant, and able to converse as freely as if we were at our stations. What is

this about the ship's being boarded by Pandronians? Such a thing should not be possible. The Pandronians don't possess the requisite technology."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Spock, but I want to make sure you're okay. What are you doing now, and where are you?"

Mildly incredulous, the ship's first officer replied with forced calm, "We are at present aiding local authorities in an attempt to recover something called a Tam Paupa, which is vital to the maintenance of stable, friendly government on Pandro. That is not important at this time.

"What is important, Lieutenant, is how Pandronians, and hostile ones at that, succeeded in gaining access to the *Enterprise*."

"We don't know for certain," Uhura tried to tell them. "Somehow they managed to simulate the precise frequency of your hand communicators, in addition to duplicating the emergency beam-aboard signal in triplicate. Mr. Scott and Mr. Kyle naturally assumed *you* were broadcasting those signals and so locked in on them and beamed the villains aboard.

"Instead of you, three Pandronians appeared. They used some kind of paralysis weapon to stun the chief, Mr. Kyle, and at least one entire security patrol. Nurse Chapel says it doesn't appear to be fatal, but all five people affected are still immobile. Mr. Scott can talk, but that seems to be about all."

"What steps have you taken, Lieutenant?" Kirk demanded to know.

"All security forces have been mobilized and are now hunting the Pandronians, Captain," she reported. "The ship is on full alert, and all personnel are aware of the Pandronians' presence."

"What do they hope to achieve?" Kirk wondered aloud, static badly crippling the transmission.

"Excuse me, Captain," Spock broke in, "but it seems clear that the Pandronians who boarded the *Enterprise* are in some way connected with those responsible for the theft of the Tam Paupa. Yet I do not understand how they could know we are aiding the government—or how they are performing technical feats supposedly beyond their capacity."

"I want answers, Mr. Spock, not more questions. Stand by, Uhura."

"Standing by, sir," she replied. There followed a period of intense discussion on the surface below, none of which came over the speakers understandably.

Arex used the interruption to address the command chair. "Lieutenant Uhura?"

"What is it, Mr. Arex?"

The navigator looked thoroughly confused. "It is only that in routine observation of the surface below us, I have recently detected something which may be of interest."

"What is it?"

The Edoan manipulated instrumentation. A topographic photomap of a large section of Pandro was projected by the main viewscreen forward. A cross-hair sight appeared, was adjusted to line up on the map's northeast quadrant. Several concentric circles of lightly shaded blue were superimposed over the region, the colors intensifying near the cross hairs.

"There seems to be an unexpectedly high level of controlled radiation active in this region," the navigator explained. "It is far more intense and sophisticated than anything else operating on Pandro, more concentrated even than anything in the capital city itself. It may be that it is a secret Pandronian installation."

"Just a second, Lieutenant Arex. M'ress, switch the lieutenant's intercom into the ship-to-ground broadcast." The Caitian communications officer executed the command, and Arex repeated the information for the benefit of those on the ground.

"Most interesting, Mr. Arex," came Spock's reply after the navigator had finished relaying his discovery. "Could you compare the center of radiant generation with our present position? Dr. McCoy will also activate his communicator to provide you with our most powerful detectable signal."

Several anxious moments followed during which M'ress pinpointed the source of the communicator broadcast. She then relayed the coordinates to Arex, who compared them with the location of the cross hairs on the photomap, then gave the information to Spock.

"*Most* interesting," the first officer replied in response, without bothering to indicate why it was so intriguing. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

"Uhura?" Kirk's voice sounded again. "Maintain red alert until the Pandronians are taken—alive, if possible. We believe they may have something to do with a tiny but dangerous rebel faction that opposes the constituted Pandronian government. But we don't know how they're doing what they're doing, or why.

"You can regard them as dangerous fanatics liable to try anything, no matter how insane. If they belong to the same group, they've already committed the ultimate act of outrage against their people. Consider humans in a similar position and treat these boarders likewise. But no killing if it can be avoided."

"We'll watch ourselves, Captain," Uhura assured him firmly. "Make sure you watch yourselves."

"Advice received and noted, Lieutenant. Contact us when something has been resolved—if you're able. The radiation Mr. Arex detected is undoubtedly responsible for our difficulties in communication. Kirk out"

"*Enterprise* out," Uhura countered.

Kirk put his communicator away, turned his attention to his first officer. Spock was making sketches on a small pad. "Tendrazin is here, Captain," he explained, indicating a small circle. "Our present position is approximately here, according to Mr. Arex's information."

Kirk called Commander bn Bem over and showed him Spock's sketch, explaining what the symbols meant.

"Yes, correct is," the Pandronian agreed, indicating the distances and relationships of Tendrazin and their current location.

"We are traveling in this line," Spock continued, using stylus and pad to elaborate. "The source of the unusual radiation, as detected by instruments on our ship, Commander, lies about here." He tapped an *X* mark slightly north and west of their present position. "Almost in a direct line with our present course away from Tendrazin. Does the Pandronian

government or any private Pandronian concern operate an installation in that area which might produce such radiants?"

"In the *varbox*?" bn Bem stammered unbelievingly. "I have from home away been, but not so long as that. But to make certain is always good idea." He called out in Pandronian.

eb Riss joined them, giving Spock's crude map sketch a quick, curious glance. "Have in this region," and bn Bem pointed to the radiation source, explaining its meaning, "any government posts been emplaced since my leaving?"

eb Riss's reaction was no less incredulous than the commander's. If anything, Kirk felt, it was more intense. "In that area lies nothing—nothing," he told them assuredly. "Is most intense and unwholesomest swampland. In such territories exist the most dangerous lifeforms in constant state of battle and recombination. No sane Pandronian would there go, and total Mad One would live not to reach it."

"Our readings wouldn't be off so drastically," Kirk informed him. "There is unquestionably a great deal of activity of a sophisticated nature going on there."

"Natural sources, maybe?" ventured eb Riss.

Kirk shook his head slowly. "Absolutely not. The quality and kind of radiation stamp it as artificial in source. If it was natural, Lieutenant Arex wouldn't have bothered to mention it to us unless it was dangerous."

"Is all very hard to believe," eb Riss muttered. "Certain is This One no representative of Pandro government there has been. No private group could build installation there, not even stealers of Tam Paupa. Must be mistaken your ship's detectors."

"Unlikely," Spock said sharply. "Nor is Lieutenant Arex the type to make such a report without triple-checking his readings."

"Are you so sure the rebels couldn't have a hideout in that area?" McCoy pressed bn Bem.

"Are mad and evil the blasphemers, McCoy Doctor," the commander admitted, "but suicidal are not. Remember, ourselves would not be here now if not with aid of your advanced energy weapons. Life forms here and certainly there would overwhelm These Ones, even with *fasir* to defend us.

Mad Ones have no such helping." He looked to eb Riss for confirmation.

"To knowledge of This One, *no* Pandronian has ever entered great swamps—or at least, entered and come out again to tell of it." eb Riss indicated agreement

"And still," Kirk murmured thoughtfully, "Arex insists there's something in there. Something throwing off a lot of controlled energy. Something that's been interfering with our communications to the *Enterprise*." He eyed bn Bem firmly.

"Whatever it is, it's not very far off our present path. It'll be interesting to see if your tracker leads us toward that area. Don't you think that would be a mite suspicious, if these *coryat* tracks curve toward the radiation source?"

"All may come to be, Kirk Captain," eb Riss admitted, "but if does, tracks will there end. Not best tracker on Pandro can follow prints in swamplands."

"They won't have to," Spock explained to the pessimistic Pandronian. He flourished the map sketch. "The *Enterprise* has located the source of radiation. If we turn toward it, we need only continue on through the swamp in its direction. If required, we can recheck our position at any time by contacting the ship. Provided," he added cautioningly, "communications interference grows no worse."

"Very well so," eb Riss said, dropping his objections. "If holds true, we must proceed toward *suspected* radiation source." Evidently the Pandronian officer still refused to believe that any Pandronians could have constructed something in the inimical swamplands. "But only if *coryat* tracks lead there and no place else."

"I disagree," bn Bem said firmly. Kirk and the others looked at the commander in surprise. "I enough have seen of Federation science facilities to know that what *Enterprise* officers say is truth." He gestured with a furry arm into the jungle ahead.

"Could be circling track designed to throw off any pursuings. Could follow we *coryat* tracks for many *fluvets* and find nothing save more *coryat* tracks. *Enterprise* findings to me significant are. I think we to radiation source should proceed, no matter where go *coryat* prints."

"I concur not, Commander," objected eb Riss strongly. When bn Bem merely stared back, the other Pandronian made a hand movement indicative of resignation. "But is outranked This One. It as you say will be."

"*Slateen*," bn Bem announced in Pandronian. "Is settled, then. We toward there turn," and he pointed to the *X* on Spock's map.

eb Riss headed back to ready his own troops and to mount the lead *zintar*. As McCoy walked toward his own patiently waiting dragon he jerked a thumb toward the forest, toward the two huge trees their assailant of the previous night had tried to break through.

"Apparently," he told bn Bem, "we're heading into an especially bad area. Does that mean we're likely to encounter any more visitors like last night's?"

"Is not likely, McCoy Doctor," the commander informed him.

McCoy was surprised, but relieved, bn Bem added, "Creature that attacked us last night would not be able to compete with dangerous animals in swamplands."

"Oh," was all McCoy said, trying to conjure up an image of something that could take the monster of the forest apart integral by integral.

"Surely the thought of confronting larger primitive carnivores does not intimidate you, Doctor," Spock declared. "You have faced far more dangerous creatures on other worlds, which could not stand up to a type-two phaser."

"It's not that, Spock," the doctor explained. "It's just that the Pandronians don't even know what might be festering and growing out there. How can they, when potential antagonists break up and form new combinations every couple of days? I can take the thought of coming up against all kinds of different killers, but the idea of facing something never before in existence until it stands up and screams in your ear, and doing that maybe a couple of times a day, is a bit overpowering."

"It does reduce one's ability to prepare for defense," the first officer had to admit. "Still, that only adds to the interest of the occasion. Imagine being able to remain in one place for a while and watch evolution take place around you."

"Thanks just the same, Spock," McCoy replied. "Me, I think I'd prefer a little more biological stability." And he shivered slightly in a cool morning breeze as the howls, hoots, and shrieks of creatures which had only just come into being sounded the arrival of a new day.

VII

The low-intensity blast of a phaser set on stun exploded on the wall behind one of the three Pandronians. That was followed immediately by a distant cry of "There they are! Notify all other units."

The Pandronian that the bolt had just missed shouted to his companions. Together they increased their pace as they ran down the corridor.

In addition to hearing the faint call with their own auditory organs, the boarders had also detected it far more clearly over the pocket communicators each of them carried. Although those communicators differed substantially from Federation issue, they still received the on-board broadcasts of the *Enterprise* with shocking electronic competence.

Their very presence was something no one—not Scott, not Uhura, nor anyone else striving to locate the three intruders—could have suspected. So even as instructions to various security units and the rest of the crew were being sent through the ship, the Pandronians who were the subject of all the conversation were overhearing every word.

At that very moment the interlopers were listening to instructions passed to a large security team close ahead, directing them to block off the corridor. While the three had managed to evade the group which had nearly caught up with them, they knew that couldn't last much longer. More and more security teams were concentrating in this area, sealing off every possible escape route.

Or so they thought.

Realizing the importance of the narrowing cluster of pursuers, the Pandronians did a curious thing. They stopped. The tallest of the three fumbled with his backpack and removed a small box. A tiny screen was set on top of it with controls below.

Once activated, the screen began to display a rapidly shifting series of schematics and diagrams. Not everyone

could have recognized them, but an engineer would have known what they were instantly. They displayed, in excellent detail, the inner construction of a Federation heavy cruiser.

The operator touched a switch, freezing one diagram on the screen. All three Pandronians examined it. This was followed by a brief, intense discussion after which they hurried on down the corridor once more.

Very soon they came to a small subcorridor. Instead of rushing past, they turned down it. The subcorridor was a dead end, according to the diagram, but the Pandronians were not looking for an appropriate place to be captured or commit suicide.

Stopping near the end of the subcorridor, one of them opened a carefully marked door on the right. It opened into a cramped room, two walls of which were lined with controls. The largely automatic devices were not what interested the Pandronians, however.

By standing on a companion's shoulders, the tallest of the three was just able to reach the protective screen in the roof. The lock-down seals at each of the screen's four corners opened easily. According to the diagram they had just studied on the tiny display screen, this shield opened into a ventilation tube. Said tube executed several tight twists and turns before running down the section of the ship they desired to traverse.

Once the shield screen had been opened, the third Pandronian closed the door behind them and then climbed up onto his two companions and pulled himself into the tube above. Reaching down, he helped the first one, then the other into the shaft.

Turning in the cramped quarters, the last Pandronian to crawl in reached down to reseal the lock-downs from inside, using a small hand tool from his own pack to reach through the fine mesh to the locks on the outside.

Very soon thereafter, six armed security personnel turned down that same dead-end corridor in the course of scouring every possible avenue of escape. They moved to its end. With five phasers covering him, the ensign in charge tried first the door on the left. All instruments inside the little room appeared undisturbed and registering normally.

Then he turned to tie door on the right. The room beyond was likewise deserted. "No sign of them." He turned to leave.

"Just a minute, sir," one of the crew said. "Shouldn't we check out that overhead vent?"

The ensign retraced his steps, leaned back to stare up at the uninformative grill overhead. "Could they have slipped in there?" He wondered aloud. "It doesn't seem likely, but we'd better make certain." He pulled out his communicator.

"Engineering?"

"Engineering. Lieutenant Markham here," came the crisp reply.

"This is Security Ensign Namura. We're hunting the Pandronian boarders, and just now I'm standing in ventilation operations cubicle"—he peered around at the open door —"twenty-six. There's a sealed ventilation shaft overhead. Could a man crawl through it?"

"Just a second, Ensign." There was a pause as the engineering officer ran the schematics for that region of the ship through his own viewscreen.

"Got it now. Several men or man-sized creatures might get up in there, but the shaft goes straight up for about four meters. Then it does a number of sharp doglegs to connect with other ventilation tubes before running into a main shaft. No way a man could get through those turns, not even a contortionist."

Namura moved, stared up into the dark tube above. "Hang on, Lieutenant." Removing a small device from his waist, the ensign activated it, sending a powerful if narrow beam of illumination upward. It lit the entire four vertical meters of shaft, which were manifestly empty.

"They're not up there. Thank you, sir," the ensign said, replacing the light at his hip and speaking again into his communicator. "Security team twelve out."

Shutting off his communicator, he directed his words to the other five. "They're not in here. Let's try the next service corridor down." Relaxing slightly, the group turned and trotted out of the subcorridor.

Contact by the average member of the crew with Pandronians or things Pandronian had been infrequent and

rare. So it was unfortunately only natural that in his anxiety to run down three man-sized intruders, Namura had overlooked the basic nature of Pandronians, had not considered their physiological versatility. Far above and beyond the security team, in the very bowels of the *Enterprise*'s ventilation system, nine segments of three whole Pandronians made their rapid way around twists and turns which no man-sized creature could have negotiated.

An hour passed and a worried Uhura faced Communications. "Still no contact with the invaders, Lieutenant? It's been much too long."

"No, Lieutenant Uhurra," M'ress replied. If anything, she looked more haggard than her superior. Ears and whiskers drooped with exhaustion, her energy drained by the effort of coordinating dozens upon dozens of uninformative security reports from all over the ship, compounded by the tension which still gripped everyone on the bridge.

"Therre hasn't been a sighting of the Pandrronians in some time—only false rreporrts. One securrity team thought they had the boarrders trrapped nearr the Main Trransporrter Rroom, but they managed to slip past all purrsuerrs. I don't know what—"

Alarms suddenly began sounding at Communications, the command chair, and at several other stations around the bridge.

"Now what!" Uhura shouted.

Below, in another section of the cruiser, a badly dazed technician dragged himself to the nearest intercom. Acrid smoke swirled all around him, and the mists were lit by flashes of exploding circuitry and instrumentation shorting out. Phaser bolts and other energy beams passed through the choking air above and around him.

"Hello, hello!" he coughed into the pickup grid. "Bridge . . . emergency—"

"Bridge speaking; Lieutenant Uhura here. Who is this?"

"Technician Third Class Camus," the voice replied, shaky and barely discernible through the sounds of destruction around it. Something blew up close by and he was thrown slightly to one side. But one arm remained locked around the

console containing the intercom. Bleeding from a gash across the forehead, he blinked blood from his eyes and coughed again.

"Camus—*Camus!*" Uhura yelled over the intercom. "What's your station? Where are you?"

"I'm . . . on . . . secondary bridge," he managed to gasp out. "We've been attacked. Only myself . . . two others on duty here. Standard maintenance compliment for . . . area. Aliens attacked us . . . slipped in before we knew what was happening. Must be . . . the Pandronians." He blinked again.

"Can't see . . . too well. Smoke. We didn't expect anything. Thought . . . they were several decks above us."

"So did we," replied Uhura grimly. She glanced away, back toward Communications. "M'ress, notify all security teams that the Pandronians, are attacking the secondary bridge." She turned her attention hastily back to the intercom.

"What happened, Mr. Camus?"

"Explosive charges . . . not phasers. Shaped demolition, from what I can see." The smoke burned his eyes, and tears mixed with the blood from the gash above his eyes.

"Damage report?" Uhura queried.

"Helm's . . . okay. So's most everything else, except for minor damage. But communications are completely gone. We were lucky . . . I think."

"Report noted, Mr. Camus," Uhura told him. "This is important," she said slowly as something banged violently over the speaker. "Was the destruction achieved randomly or did they go for communications intentionally?"

"Don't know . . . Lieutenant," the technician reported, trying to see around him. "Happened too fast to tell anything."

"Understood. Listen, if they're still there, try to tie them down with your phasers," Uhura ordered him. "Security teams are on their way to you."

"Will do, Lieutenant," the technician acknowledged, just before something touched him in the middle of his back and he slumped to the deck unconscious.

Uhura looked again at M'ress. "Direct all security teams in that area to block off all turbolifts and stairwells, seal all

corridors near the secondary bridge. Maybe we can pin them down there. Also notify Sick Bay to send a medical team over —they've obviously experienced casualties." Her expression was not pleasant. "If any of those techs die, every phaser on this ship goes off stun."

There was a low murmur of agreement from the rest of the solemn bridge personnel. "Verry well, Lieutenant," the communications officer acknowledged.

"I also want extra security sent to Engineering at warp-drive control and at all approaches to the main bridge."

"Yes, Lieutenant."

Uhura voiced her thoughts aloud. "If they *were* trying for communications, or anything else on the secondary bridge, then their intentions are obvious. They're trying to cripple one or more ship functions. If that's the case, then I think they'll try for Engineering or the bridge next."

She leaned back in the command chair, resting a fist against one cheek and trying to make sense of what was going on. Several minutes passed and she noticed that the navigator had his eyes focused on her.

"Well, what are you looking at, Arex?" she snapped.

"I am as worried as you are, Lieutenant Uhura," the Edoan replied in his soft singsong voice.

"Staring at each other isn't going to help the situation any." The Edoan looked away, but remained deep in thought.

"I just can't help wondering why Pandronians, even the rebel Pandronians the captain mentioned, are trying so desperately to damage the *Enterprise*. They must know that three of them can't do any serious destruction, can't carry out anything we won't eventually repair." She shook her head slowly, wishing the solution were as simple as operating ship's communications . . . communications.

Apparently the same thought occurred to Arex. "If it is our communications they are trying to destroy," he theorized, "and not the ship itself, it seems to me there can be only one reason behind this. They are attempting to prevent us from keeping in touch with the landing party. Yet for them to want to do so must mean this rebellious faction knows the captain,

Mr. Spock, and Dr. McCoy are, as they mentioned, aiding government forces. If that is the case—"

"If that's the case," an excited Uhura finished for him, "since only the Pandronian government knows we're helping them, that means that government is home to at least one traitor. The captain needs to be told."

"I believe the Pandronian government should also be notified," the always empathetic Edoan added.

"Lieutenant M'ress," Uhura began, "call the authorities in the Pandronian capital—anyone you can make contact with. Tell them it's vital for both their security and ours that we speak immediately to someone high up in the government. Then get in touch with the captain."

"Aye, aye," the tired Caitian replied. She turned back to her control console and prepared to carry out the orders.

She was interrupted by a loud thumping from somewhere across the bridge. Like everyone else, she paused, listening. Now the strange noise was the only sound on the bridge. It didn't remain stationary, but instead seemed to move from place to place. Abruptly, the noise ceased.

It was dead quiet for a minute, and then a loud bang sounded from overhead. "They're in the repair access space above us!" Uhura shouted.

"M'ress, emergency alert! Get a security team in here on the double. We've got to—"

Carrrumphh!

A powerful concussion shook the bridge. Smoke and haze filled the air, and nearly everyone was thrown to the deck. A hole had been blown in the roof, just to the right of the science station. Recovering well, everyone dove for cover in anticipation of the coming assault. Three sections of Pandronian dropped through the ragged gap, hurriedly assembled themselves into a complete assailant. Sections of a second came close behind, the three integrals joining together like midget acrobats.

As the second alien came together, the turbolift doors to the bridge slid aside to reveal four battle-ready security personnel, phasers drawn and aimed outward.

Everything happened very quickly after that. Huddled behind the command chair, struggling for every breath, Uhura was able to absorb only isolated glimpses of the subsequent fight.

One Pandronian fired a burst at her from an unfamiliar weapon, which glanced harmlessly off the arm of the protective chair. The alien whirled quickly to fire at the turbolift. This second shot caught one of the charging security techs in the shoulder and sent her spinning to the deck.

Her companion slipped clear of the confines of the lift car and fired. The stun beam struck the first Pandronian in the midsection. As the alien collapsed, he came apart again. Ignoring the immobile midsection lying still on the deck, the head hopped onto the lower torso. One leg reached down, regained the weapon still held in a stiff hand, and prehensile toes commenced operating the gun as if nothing had happened.

The second, by now completely reformed Pandronian ignored the battle and raised a device whose muzzle was wider than its handgrip was long. He aimed it to Uhura's left and fired. The awkward-looking instrument emitted a dull *pop* which was barely audible over the noise and confusion swirling around the turbolift.

Luckily, M'ress had seen the alien point the weapon and had rolled aside. She escaped injury when the short, stubby missile landed in the middle of her console. For a microsecond the flare from Communications was too bright to look at directly. As it vanished, Uhura could see puffs of white smoke covering the console and surrounding instrumentation.

The Pandronian reloaded his weapon for a second shot. But by this time security personnel were pouring onto the bridge via walkways as well as the turbolift, faster than the three Pandronians could shoot them down.

Short and furious, the gun battle ended before the second Pandronian could unload his second missile. It ended with all three aliens—or rather, all nine independently mobile sections of same—paralyzed and motionless on the floor.

When the last operative Pandronian integral, a furiously resisting head, had been stunned, Uhura, shaken, stood up from behind the command chair. One after another, the rest of

the bridge complement rose or crawled out from their respective hiding places.

Only the security personnel who had resisted the attackers had been hit. Everyone else appeared healthy and able to resume his post. Security teams continued to pour onto the bridge, followed closely by medical teams responding to the emergency calls issued by the first to reach the bridge. It had grown incredibly crowded beneath the gap the attackers had blasted in the ceiling.

Uhura and Arex moved to examine the nine motionless shapes scattered across the deck. "Which one belongs to which one?" a bewildered security officer wondered.

"No telling," muttered Uhura. "Take the whole collection down. They can sort themselves out when they regain consciousness. When that happens, I've a few questions I want answers to—and I'll have them, or these three will be disassembled into a lot more than nine pieces!"

Under the close guard of a dozen security personnel, supervisory medical technicians loaded the various sections of dismembered aliens onto stretchers and carted them down to the security area of Sick Bay.

Once the bridge was clear of Security and Pandronians, Uhura used a pocket communicator to contact Engineering and request a repair team. Then she moved to stand before the shambles that had been the communications station.

M'ress met her there, trying to peer into the wreckage, yet careful to jerk clear whenever something within the white-hot mass would flare threateningly.

"I don't know what was in that missile," she confessed to Uhura, "but whateverr it was prroduced an enorrmous amount of heat. They couldn't have chosen a betterr way to make a thorrough mess of things."

It didn't take an expert to see what M'ress meant. Instead of being blown apart, the communications station had been melted, fused into a half-solid wall of metal and plastic slag. Where they could have replaced the damaged or destroyed areas resulting from an explosion, now the entire section of wall would have to be cut clear out to the depths of the heat damage and the console would have to be literally rebuilt.

When Scott heard what had happened, there was no holding him in Sick Bay, despite Chapel's admonitions. Having recovered the use of all but his legs below the knee the *Enterprise*'s chief engineer was on the bridge minutes later. He propped himself up on the mobile medical platform and directed the engineering team which had already commenced repairs. His steady swearing was directed at those who had dared violate his beloved equipment in so horrid a fashion.

It wasn't long before the subjects of Scotty's ire began to recover from the effects of security phasers. Uhura sat in the sealed security area and watched the activity within the Sick Bay cell as the Pandronians reassembled themselves.

"The lower portions recovered first, the head last," Chapel was explaining to her. "I expect that's only reasonable, since the heads contain the greatest concentration of nerves and would be most strongly affected by a phaser set on stun."

However, when Uhura began questioning them via a hand translator, the Pandronians might as well have remained unconscious, for all the loquaciousness they displayed.

"Why did you board the *Enterprise*?" she inquired for the twentieth time. All three sat quietly at the rear of the cell, ignoring the energy barrier and those beyond it while they stared with single-minded intensity at the back wall.

"Why did you destroy our communications facilities?"

Silence of a peculiarly alien kind.

"Was it to prevent our communicating with our landing party on Pandro? If so, how did you know about it?"

Perhaps, she thought, a question which should strike closer to home.

"Are you," she began deliberately, "connected to the rebel groups of Pandronians operating on Pandro? If that's true, why interfere with us? We have no desire to interfere in Pandronian domestic squabbles."

That was an outright lie, since the captain, Mr. Spock, and Dr. McCoy were openly aiding the present planetary government, but it produced the same response from the quiescent three, which was no response.

Uhura made a sound of disgust, turned to Chapel. "You're certain the paralysis has completely worn off?"

"From everything I can tell, they're fully functional. Any paralysis of the vocal apparatus is voluntary, Lieutenant."

"Fully functional, huh?" Uhura muttered sardonically. "Let's see some functioning, then." She raised her voice, all but screamed herself hoarse. "At least identify yourselves! Or are you going to insist you're not even Pandronians!"

Unexpectedly, the middle alien turned to face her. "We are the representatives of the True Order," he said contentedly.

Uhura was not impressed. "I seriously doubt that, whoever you are and whatever that's supposed to mean. But it's nice to know that you're capable of speech."

The Pandronian assumed a lofty pose. "Can talk to lower forms when mood occurs."

"Goody. Maybe you'd condescend to chat with this representative of a lower order about a few things. Once more: Why did you sneak aboard our ship?"

Dead silence. Uhura sighed.

"All right, if you don't want to talk about what you're doing here and why you've brutally assaulted those who mean you no harm, maybe you're willing to answer questions about yourselves." She began pacing back and forth in front of the energy barrier.

"What is this True Order you mentioned?"

"The Society of Right Integration," the Pandronian replied, as if talking to a child. "Only the True Order to restoring the natural order of lifes on Pandro is dedicated. Dedicated to bringing end to desecrating civilization now existing. Dedicated to eliminating vile government which perpetuates unnaturalness. To cleansing running sore of—"

"Take it easy," Uhura broke in. "You're giving me a running headache. What's this natural order you're so hot about restoring?"

Shifting his position slightly, the Pandronian gazed upward. "In beginning all lifes on planet Pandro had freedom of integration complete. Could integrate one life form with any other to achieve integrated shape pleasurable for moment or lifetimes. Had even primitive Pandronian intelligences like This One great flexibility of form. Often primitive rites including dividing and recombining to gain new insights into

existences." The alien's voice turned from reverent to remorseful.

"Then did bastard civilization now grown huge begin to take hold. To become rigid, unfluid, frozen was Pandronian intelligences. Recombinations among intelligent Pandronians were," and his words became coated with distaste, "law forbidden. Realized only a few true believers, first of True Order, that this was horrible wrongness! Themselves dedicated to restoring naturalness of Pandronian lifes!"

His head dropped and turned resolutely from her. Further questions elicited only silence. Having delivered their sermon, the captives apparently had nothing more to say.

Uhura had listened stolidly to every word of the diatribe. Now, when it became clear they would learn nothing more from the three, she turned and spoke bitterly to Chapel.

"A bunch of religious fanatics. Wonderful! So somehow we've gotten ourselves mixed up in some kind of theological, philosophical rebellion against Pandronian society. A normal group of revolutionaries I'd know how to deal with, but these," and she gestured back at the silent Pandronians, "are of an impossible type anywhere in the galaxy. You can't talk reason and logic and common sense to them. Whatever such types are rebelling against is never worse than what they represent."

"I wonder," a concerned Chapel murmured, "if the captain and the others realize how fanatical their opposition is?"

"I don't know," Uhura muttered. "I hope so, because according to Chief Scott's preliminary estimation of the damage to ship's communication's facilities, we're certainly not going to be telling them about it for a while. Even energy-supplemented hand communicators would be hard pressed to reach the surface, assuming we could cannibalize enough components for them. And that kind of signal wouldn't get two centimeters through the radiation distortion now blanketing that region of the planet.

"I only hope the captain and Mr. Spock aren't as easily surprised as we were . . ."

Once the strange roll-and-jolt novelty of riding the *zintar* had worn off, Kirk relaxed enough to enjoy their journey. One thing the ride never became was boring. Not with the incredible diversity of life that swarmed around them.

Kirk was able to study the constantly changing vista as the three *zintars* parted greenery and snarling animals alike, living ships plowing through waves of brown and green. In places he felt as if he recognized certain plants and, more infrequently, familiar animals that they had encountered before. As bn Bem had indicated earlier, these were the members of Pandronian nature which had found success and harmony in a particular combination of integrals. So much so that they reproduced as a continuing species.

These conservative representatives of Pandronian life were seemingly far outnumbered by the biologically unfulfilled. One could never predict what might hop, leap, run, or fly from behind the next tree, or scurry across a brief flare of open space ahead.

The excitement was intensified because the Pandronians were as new to many of these unstable shapes as Kirk. The thrill of never-ending discovery was intoxicating. In fact, he mused, that was the best way to describe the state of life on Pandro, where nature was on a perpetual drunk.

For the first time he had leisure to speculate on a host of related, equally fascinating possibilities. How, for example, did the Pandronians insure the stability of their domesticated animals? Imagine a farmer going out in the morning to milk the local version of a cow, only to find himself facing a barn full of bears.

Or what about mutating crops which could be nourishment incarnate when the sun went down and deadly poisonous on its rising? Even the stable forms of Pandronian life, like bn Bem and his ilk, were capable under proper stimulus of disassociating.

He didn't think, exciting as it was, that he'd care to be a Pandronian. Not when you could wake up one morning and find your head had gone for a walk.

Another full day and night of crashing through the undergrowth brought them to the end of the tracks. Dismounting from the lead *zintar*, the chief tracker confirmed

that the *coryat* trail swung neither left nor right of the muddy, murky shoreline straight ahead, but instead vanished at the water's edge.

Perhaps coincidentally, the tracker also located evidence of considerable recent activity at that location on the shore, as of numerous creatures milling about in the soft soil where the tracks disappeared.

ab Af spoke to the *zintar* he was riding and the long furry form executed its elevator movement so that its riders could dismount easily.

McCoy was the first to approach the scum-laden edge of the water. "Not very appealing country," he commented, eyeing the unwholesome muck with professional distaste.

"An understatement, Doctor." McCoy turned, saw Spock standing just behind him and likewise surveying the terrain. "It is no wonder that the Pandronians have not ventured into it, or that eb Riss doubted Lieutenant Arex's information."

What lay before them was neither water nor mud, but something which partook of both qualities. Where it didn't eddy ponderously up against solid ground, the thick brownish sludge bubbled softly under the impetus of noisome subterranean gases. Delicate gray-green fungus floated over much of the shoreline shallows. It drifted and clung viscously to the boles of massive multirooted trees. Vines and creepers and things which might as easily have been animal instead of vegetable hung draped haphazardly from intertwined branches, forming a cellulose web above the waterways between the trees.

Noting the absence of screeches and screams, McCoy commented, "It's unusually quiet here, compared to the territory we've crossed." He walked back, questioned bn Bem. "Is it quieter here than in the forest because the swamps aren't as fertile?"

"No, McCoy Doctor," the commander assured him. "Swamp lifes strive noise not to make. Unhealthy to call attention to Oneself in swamplands." Kirk joined them, and bn Bem turned his attention to the captain.

"According to tracker ours and instruments yours, Kirk Captain, our quarry in there somewhere has gone." He made

a broad gesture to encompass as much of the morass as possible. "Is still hard to believe any Pandronian would into swamplands flee, but seems so. To follow we must a raft build." He started to turn and walk away, but paused at a thought and looked back.

"Is *certain* your people found radiation source that way?" He pointed straight ahead into the depths of the stinking riot of growth.

Spock held out a confident arm, matching the direction of the commander's own. "Directly along this line, Commander."

"So it be, then," bn Bem agreed reluctantly. He faced eb Riss, "Set all to raft constructing. Must push and pull our way through. *Zintars* and handlers here will remain to await our return."

"What return?" eb Riss snorted resignedly. "In there to go is new death for all. Is madness to do, especially," and he glared haughtily at Kirk and Spock, "on word of outworlders."

"Forget you that *coryat* tracks lead here and signs of many creatures waiting disturb this place," bn Bem countered firmly. "Is advisable to go to source of strange radiation."

"Is not my objection to that," eb Riss corrected him. "Is getting to there from here my worry."

"On that I'm with you, Lud," McCoy commented, still studying the hostile nonground ahead of them. "Can't we just transport up to the ship and have Mr. Scott beam us down at the coordinates given for the radiation source, Jim?"

Kirk smiled apologetically. "You know that wouldn't be very good strategy, Bones. Remember the attitude of guards toward us when we first beamed down here with the commander? And they were expecting us. No, in this case slow but sure does the trick—I hope." He pulled out his communicator, flipped it open.

"But I don't think we'll have to fool with a raft." He glanced reassuringly at the curious bn Bem and eb Riss. "I'll order some strong folding boats sent down from ship's stores.

"Kirk to *Enterprise*." The normal brief pause between signal and reply came and passed. Frowning slightly, he tried again. "Kirk to *Enterprise* . . . come in, *Enterprise*." An arboreal creature squawked piercingly from somewhere behind them.

"Mr. Spock?" Kirk said, eyeing his first oflicer significantly. Spock activated his own communicator, repeated the call, and was rewarded with equal silence.

"Nothing, Captain. Nor is it radiation interference, this time. There is no indication that the ship is receiving our signals." He glanced over at bn Bem, who was watching anxiously.

"It would appear, Commander, that the rebel faction which we are tracking and which placed several of their number on board the *Enterprise* has managed to somehow interrupt ship-to-ground communications. Of course, we cannot yet be absolutely certain it is the same group, but evidence strongly points to it."

"I wonder if that's all they've managed to interrupt, Spock," McCoy grumbled.

"We've no way of knowing, Bones. And the breakdown could be due to other factors besides obstreperous Pandronians." McCoy could tell from the tone of Kirk's voice how little stock the captain placed in alternate possibilities. "We might as well proceed as sit here."

"To commence construction of the raft now," bn Bem directed eb Riss. The other Pandronian officer acknowledged the order and moved to comply.

Construction of two large rafts of local wood proceeded apace under eb Riss's skillful supervision. Kirk had to admit that the Pandronian, whatever his attitudes toward the Federation officers, knew what he was doing.

They were aided by the extreme mobility of the Pandronian troopers. Their ability to separate into two or three sections enabled each of them to perform functions no human could have duplicated, and with amazing speed.

As the day wore on they were attacked only twice while working on the rafts. According to bn Bem, this was an excellent average, considering their proximity to the teeming swamps. Kirk was thankful he wasn't present here on a day when the local life chose to act belligerently.

The first assault came when something like a large, supple tree trunk slithered out of the sludge nearby and panicked the Pandronians working nearest the shore. The creature sported

long, branchlike tentacles. Its mimicry was lethally impressive: It looked exactly like a section of tree.

Under selective phaser fire from Kirk, Spock, and McCoy, the branches broke away, scampering in all directions on tiny legs to retreat back into the swamp and along the water's edge. Despite repeated phaser bursts, however, the main body of the tree snake remained where it had emerged from the muck, exhibiting no inclination to retreat.

Close inspection revealed the reason for this obstinacy. The thing didn't retreat because it couldn't. The trunk that looked like a tree was just that—an old warped log which the many small creatures that resembled branches had adopted as a central body.

"A poor choice of association," Spock commented. "Surely the branch animals could not hope to blend successfully with a vegetable."

"True is, Spock Commander," bn Bem agreed. "Is defensive integration for little long eaters. Other predators would be by size of this 'body' frightened off. Tomorrow will branch lifes be maybe spines on back of big carnivore, or maybe decorative striping along belly of big plant grazer."

The second attack on the raft builders was more insidious and dangerous than that of the almost pathetic branch imitators.

Kirk had gone for a stroll along the swamp edge, moving just deep enough into the forest to frustrate anything lurking below the sludge's surface. To snatch him from between these intertwining trees would require a Pandronian killer with more flexibility and brains than any Kirk had seen thus far.

He was taking care to remain within sight of the construction site when he heard the low thumping. It sounded something like a muffled shout.

Drawing his phaser, he moved cautiously forward, toward the source of the sound. In a partial clearing he discovered a rolling, jerking shape making frantic, nearly comprehensible noises. It was submerged under a blanket of olive-green puffballs. Two long ropes of interconnected puffballs were dragging the smothered form toward the ominous waterline nearby.

Kirk recognized that gesticulating, helpless shape immediately, was shouting back over a shoulder even as he ran forward.

"Spock—bn Bem—this way, hurry!"

Breaking into the clearing, he set his phaser for maximum stun and raised it toward the two living green ropes. At the same time he was assaulted by a horde of other fuzzy spheres. Not one was larger around than his fist. All were faceless, featureless. Other than the unbroken mantle of green fuzz, all that showed were three sets of tiny, jointed legs ending in a single short hooked claw.

Kirk experienced a moment of panic as the creatures swarmed around and onto him, began attaching themselves to his legs and feet. There was no pain, no biting sensation from unseen jaws. The puffballs neither stuck nor clawed nor punctured his skin, but merely grabbed tight and held on.

A similar multitude had blanketed McCoy to the point where only the doctor's hands, lower legs, and face remained visible. He was using all his strength to keep the fuzzy spheres clear of his mouth, nose, and eyes, so that he could still see and breathe. Every time he opened his mouth to call for help, one of the puff-balls rolled over it, and he had to fight to clear the orifice. Meanwhile, the two long lines of interlocked balls, like knotted green hemp, continued to drag the doctor ever closer to the shore.

Kirk's phaser, carefully aimed, cleared some of them off his own arms and McCoy's body, but even as dozens fell stunned, other newcomers swarmed out of the underbrush to take their place. In seconds, however, Spock, bn Bem, and several Pandronian soldiers had joined him. With the addition of Spock's phaser, they were able to keep the fuzzy reinforcements at bay.

bn Bem and the soldiers were rushing toward the trapped McCoy. Each Pandronian brandished a long prod ending in a hypodermic tip. Working smoothly and efficiently, they began poking each individual bristle ball with the needles. Kirk learned later what he was too busy then to guess—each poke injected a puff-ball with a minute quantity of the same drug that the *fasir's* syringe darts carried.

bn Bem and his companions began at the spot where the twin chains of green were holding on to McCoy. As soon as one ball fell away, another rushed in to take its place and continue the seemingly inexorable march toward the swamp.

But with Kirk and Spock now holding all reinforcements at the edge of the forest clearing, re-formation of the two green chains took longer and longer. Finally the chain was permanently broken and the Pandronians were able to begin picking individual puffballs off McCoy. When that was concluded, they chased the remaining spheres into the depths of the forest.

"You okay, Bones?" Kirk asked solicitously as he hurried over to the doctor. McCoy was sitting up, slightly groggy, and brushing at his clothing where the tiny creatures had clung.

"I guess so, Jim. They didn't break the skin or anything."

"How did it happen, Doctor?" asked Spock.

McCoy considered a moment before replying. "I was bending to get a closer look at something that looked like an overgrown aboveground truffle over"—he abruptly began searching around, finally pointing toward a tree deeper in the forest—"over there. Then it felt like someone had dumped a hundred-kilo bale of hay on me.

"Next thing I knew I was rolling over on the ground while those little monstrosities poured over me." He kicked at a couple of the immobile, now innocent-looking green balls.

"They were all over me in an instant. And they won't be pulled off." As Kirk helped him to his feet McCoy queried the commander, "What are they, anyhow?" His face contorted irritably and he resumed rubbing at his clothes. "They may not bite, but they sure itch like the devil."

"*Vigroon*," bn Bem replied, nudging several of the olive globes with a blue foot. "A successful life form we well know. Even near Tendrazin we have them, but they are not dangerous generally, since occur not nearly in such impressive numbers.

"By selves are harmless eaters of insect forms and other small things. But in integration they act concerted—as you have had opportunity to observe, McCoy Doctor."

"Saints preserve me from such opportunities," McCoy mumbled, trying to scratch a place on his back he couldn't reach.

"Are found near water only, when in dangerous numbers," bn Bem went on helpfully. Kneeling, he pushed six legs and fur aside on one of the immobile *vigroon*, to reveal a tiny circular mouth lined with minute teeth.

"Single, even fair number of *vigroon* could not kill any animal of size. Jaws too small and weak, teeth too tiny. But in large number integration can associative *vigroon* smother large prey or drown it. Last named what they try to do to you, McCoy Doctor.

"Many *vigroon* jump on prey creature to keep it from fleeing. Others link up to pull into water, where held under until drowned. Can then devour nonresisting corpse at their leisure. You would a great feast have been for them, McCoy Doctor."

"Thanks, but I don't feel complimented," McCoy muttered in response to the commander's evaluation.

"You sure you're not hurt, Bones?"

"I'm fine, Jim. Even the itching's beginning to fade—thank goodness."

Kirk turned to his first officer. "Mr. Spock, try to raise the *Enterprise* again."

"Very well, Captain." Activating his communicator, Spock attempted to contact the ship, with the same results as before.

"Still no response whatsoever, sir."

Kirk sighed, sat down on a rock, and ran both hands through his hair. "Things happen awfully fast with Pandronians. I still haven't figured out how those rebels managed to board the ship, not to mention knock out our communications. Pandronian technology just isn't supposed to be that advanced."

"We admit to knowing little about Pandro, Captain. It is conceivable that our preliminary fleet reports understated their achievements in certain areas by several factors. Given what has taken place so far, it would seem more than merely conceivable—unless another explanation can be found."

Kirk glanced up hopefully. "Have you any alternative in mind, Mr. Spock?"

The first officer managed to appear discouraged. "I regret, Captain, that I do not."

VIII

From the moment the two rafts were launched into the murky water Kirk could sense nervousness in the Pandronian troops. As they poled and paddled their way clear of the shore, the nervousness increased—and there was nothing more unnerving than watching a Pandronian with the jitters, their heads shifting position on their shoulders with startling unpredictability.

Kirk could sympathize. There was no telling what might lurk just beneath the surface of a swamp on any world, and on Pandro that was true a thousand times over. But as they traveled farther and deeper into the seemingly endless morass of sweating trees and dark waters and nothing monstrous arose to sweep the rafts out from beneath them, the Pandronians gained confidence. Oddly, though, the more relaxed and assured the regular troops became, the more concerned and uncertain grew Commander Ari bn Bem.

Kirk was finally moved to ask what was the matter. "Why the nervous face, Commander? We've had no trouble so far—less than we had when we were 'safely' on shore building the rafts." He peered into the dank mists ahead. "I don't see any sign of trouble, either."

"Is precisely what worries This One, Kirk Captain," bn Bem told him softly. "Should we have been assailed by unwholesome lifes several times by now. Not only has that happened not, but is little sign of any kinds of lifes, antagonistic or otherwise.

"In fact, the deeper into *varbox* we go, the scarcer becomes all life forms. Is strange. Is worrisome. Is most unsettling."

"Is it possible," Spock ventured, "that the rebellious Pandronians, who presumably have retreated through here on many occasions, could have committed so much destruction and taken so much life that the surviving inhabitants of this region have fled to other sections of the swamp?"

"Would take army of Pandronians all equipped with *fasirs* to clear even tiny portion of *varbox*," the commander countered, "and then would suffer heavy casualties in process. Would not think Mad Ones had such power or abilities at their command. If so, would believe they would have caused Pandro government much more trouble than they have before now. Find possibility unworkable, Spock Commander," he concluded firmly.

"Can you offer an alternate explanation for the comparative tranquillity of our passage, then?" the first officer wanted to know.

bn Bem openly admitted he could not. He repeated his feelings again: "Worries me."

Lud eb Riss, who was in command of the second raft poling alongside them, didn't share the commander's paranoia. "I see not why it should," he exclaimed almost happily. "Lucky can These Ones count themselves. Personal opinion This One is that if we not another meat-eater see again, will be more than pleased. Not to look gift *zintar* in the masticatory orifice."

They made excellent, unimpeded progress through the *varbox* all that day. When it grew too dark to travel accurately, they camped on the rafts for the night, mooring them to each other and to four great trees. The thick boles formed a rough square, and their net of vines and creepers provided a psychologically pleasing barrier overhead.

Soft hootings and muted howls colored the night, but none of them came close enough to trouble the sleepers or the Pandronian troops on guard duty. Except for the humidity, the following morning was almost pleasant.

"When do we reach this place by your ship's supposedly infallible instruments located, Kirk Captain?" an irritable eb Riss wanted to know when the morning had passed.

Kirk turned to his first officer. "Well, Mr. Spock?"

Spock frowned slightly, his attention shifting from the view forward to the figure-covered sketch he held in one hand. "We should have reached it already, Captain. I confess to being somewhat discouraged, but we may still—"

A loud Pandronian shout caused him to break off and, along with everyone else, look ahead. The second raft was moving a

little in advance of the other, and a sharp-eyed trooper standing precariously on the foremost log was chattering excitedly in Pandronian. bn Bem and eb Riss were both straining to see something no one else had.

Kirk, Spock, and McCoy did likewise, and the reason for the lookout's enthusiasm became evident seconds later. They were once more nearing solid land. It rose in a smooth, firm bank from the sludge's edge. Despite the thick cover of growth, there was no concealing it. The ground looked as solid as that they had left the long Pandronian day before.

"I thought you once mentioned, Commander," Spock murmured, "that the width and length of this swampland was far greater than this."

"So This One did," bn Bem replied positively. "And so it is." He gestured at the muddy beach they were approaching. "Cannot possibly be other side of *varbox*. Can only one thing be: an island in *varbox* middle."

"But you cannot be certain?" the first officer persisted.

bn Bem turned to face him. "Cannot, since no Pandronian has ever penetrated into *varbox* this far—and returned to tell about it. But can be ninety-eight percent positive is *not* other side of *varbox*. Island must be. Could be many others."

"We can count at some future date," Kirk interrupted them. "Right now I'm interested in finding out what's on this particular one."

"Is seconding feelings, Kirk Captain," said bn Bem fervently, his hand fondling the dark sidearm strapped to his hip.

Both rafts grounded on the muck of the narrow beach. Amid much grunting and struggling by Pandronians and Federation officers alike, the waterlogged rafts were pulled far enough up onto the mud-cum-earth to insure their not drifting away. Probably they needn't have bothered with the effort, since the current here was nearly nonexistent.

No one, however, wanted to chance being marooned in the center of the dismal region without an immediate means of retreat. If the island turned out to be small, there might not be enough suitable lumber present to duplicate the rafts.

But as they moved cautiously inland it became slowly apparent that the island they trod was one of respectable

size, despite the difficulties of seeing very far to either side because of the dense ground cover. Had it not been for bn Bem's and eb Riss's assurance that they could not possibly have traversed the entire swamp, Kirk would have felt certain they had landed on its opposite shore.

Gradually the trees gave way to brush and thick bushes, the jungle turning reluctantly into less dense savanna. It appeared they might even be entering an open area, like a grassy plain. The low, easily ascendable hill looming ahead of them was almost barren of growth. Only a few scraggly bushes poked forlorn stems above the waving pseudograss.

"We ought to be able to get a good look at the rest of the island from up there," Kirk surmised, indicating the low summit. "This can't be a very high island. Not if the *varbox* maintains its similarity to Terran swamplands."

Starting forward, he pushed aside several bare branches and took a step upward.

The hill moved.

Jumping clear, Kirk joined the rest of the party in retreating back toward the jungle. Disturbed, the hill continued to quiver and rise heavenward.

"Nightmare!" bn Bem shouted in Pandronian. But Kirk felt he could translate the commander's exclamation without resorting to instruments.

At full extension the apparition was at least ten meters tall, equally wide. As to how long it actually was they had no way of telling, because they couldn't see around the thing.

A minimum of twelve heads glared down at them. Each head was different from the next, no two alike, boasting various numbers of eyes and nostrils and ears. Each mouth save one (which showed a round sucker at its end) displayed varying but impressive stores of cutlery.

Each head bobbed and twisted at the end of a different neck. Some were long and snakelike, others short and heavily armored. Still others were jointed like a long finger. Several of the "growths" Kirk had noted on the creature's side and top moved independently, along with limbs of all shapes and sizes scattered seemingly at random along both sides of the horrible mass.

Grossest abomination of all was the huge body itself, a bloated ellipsoid whose skin alternated from feathers to scales to a smooth, pebbled epidermis not unlike the surface of certain starships. The skin was squared in places, round in others, concave in still more.

It looked as if something had taken a cargoload of creatures and thrown them into a vast kettle, then pounded and boiled the entire collection together and somehow reanimated the ghastly concoction. As the thing moved, the most awful cacophony of whistles, tweets, howls, and bellows issued from the various mouths. Round eyes big as a man glared down from one skull, flanked by slitted pupils in a second. One great burning red crescent shone in the midst of a third.

Somehow the beast moved, on an assortment of limbs as diverse as the rest of it. Short, thick pseudopods alternated with stubby, thick-nailed feet and long-clawed running limbs. It humped rather than walked toward them.

Still retreating into the jungle, the Pandronians fought to assemble their *fasir*. With phasers set on maximum, Kirk, Spock, and McCoy blasted away at the oncoming behemoth. It was like trying to stop a three-dimensional phalanx instead of a single creature.

Various sections and integrals would drop away—injured or killed—but the undisciplined collage would retain its shape and purpose. One, two, three heads were sliced away by the powerful handguns. The remaining nine continued to dart and probe for prey as if nothing had happened.

The Pandronians had almost assembled the dart-thrower when a high whining sounded. Every Pandronian, from the lowest-ranking soldier up to bn Bem, abruptly fell to the ground. They lay there, moaning and holding their heads.

Completely unaffected, a dumbfounded trio of Federation officers stood nearby, uncertain whether to aid their fallen allies or to continue firing at the lumbering mountain in front of them.

Events decided for them. As the first whine sounded, the creature's dreadful roars and yowls turned into a pitiable assortment of mewings and meeps and cries of pain. It turned like a great machine and began flopping off gruesomely

toward the south, smashing down vegetation as it went until it had passed from sight.

Once the beast had vanished, the sound stopped.

When no explanation for this fortunate but inexplicable occurrence presented itself, Kirk turned his attention to something hopefully more understandable.

"What happened to the Pandronians, Bones?"

McCoy looked up at him. He was bending over one of the soldiers. "Beats me, Jim. The sound that drove off that grotesque impossibility also hit them pretty hard. Don't ask me why, or what produced it."

The soldier's normal healthy blue color had faded drastically. Every other Pandronian had similarly paled, though now their normal hue began to return.

"Inside my head, suddenly something," a panting bn Bem told them. "Painful, but more shock than anything else, This One thinks. Could tolerate if had to, but would rather not."

"From the look on your face, I can understand why," a sympathetic McCoy agreed. "What felled you drove off the monster as well. I suppose we should be grateful for that, but somehow I'm not so sure. At best this was a pretty indiscriminate kind of rescue."

"I do not think that term is entirely appropriate, under the circumstances," a voice objected. Everyone turned to its source.

Standing in a slight gap in the undergrowth leading toward the center of the island stood a semicircle of Pandronians. Kirk experienced no elation at the sight of their black robes and hoods. They wanted their suspicions about the Pandronian rebels confirmed, but not under these conditions.

More important even than the presence of Pandronian rebels here deep in the *varbox* were the modern hand weapons they held trained on the government party. They differed noticeably in their sophistication from anything Kirk had seen on Pandro so far. He almost recognized them—no, he *did* recognize them.

The source of the weapons—and probably the explanation for a great many other as yet unexplained occurrences—was

to be found in the middle of the Pandronians: one, two . . . three Klingons.

Holstering his own sidearm, the one in the middle walked forward, stopped an arm's length from Kirk. "Captain James Kirk, I presume? I am Captain Kor of the Imperial Science Division. You and your companions—he gestured to include the dazed Pandronians as well as Spock and McCoy—"are my prisoners."

"What's the meaning of your presence here, Kor?" Kirk snapped, unintimidated. "What are you up to on this world?"

"You will probably find out in due course, Captain," Kor assured him. "Until then, I require your sidearm, please?" He held out a hand for the gun in Kirk's fist.

Kirk studied the surrounding group, all armed with Klingon weapons, and then reluctantly handed over his phaser. Spock and McCoy followed.

Black-clad Pandronians immediately ran toward them, disarming their counterparts and confiscating anything resembling a weapon, including the partially assembled *fasir*.

Under close guard, the helpless group started into the island's interior.

"Actually," Kor said imperiously, "you should all thank me for saving your lives. Had I not ordered the controller activated, the creature would likely have exterminated you by now."

"Not true," protested bn Bem with dignity. "*Fasir* would have induced deintegration in monster."

"Perhaps," Kor admitted, showing white teeth in a wide grin. "Primitive though they are, your local weapons are effective, in their fashion. And the creature was, after all, only one of our more modest experiments."

"Experiments?" echoed a curious Spock.

"First and Science Officer Spock," Kirk said tightly, "and this is our ship's chief physician, Dr. McCoy."

Kor did not acknowledge the introductions. After all, the officers were prisoners. "Experiments," he conceded, "yes. Experiments which it has been your misfortune and our inconvenience for you to have stumbled upon, Captain Kirk.

Why could you not simply have returned to your ship and taken your trouble-making selves elsewhere?"

"I don't know about the misfortune part," Kirk replied, glaring as a black-clad Pandronian prodded him with the muzzle of a weapon, "but you can bet on the inconvenience. The presence of armed Klingons on a world of high sentience like Pandro, without the knowledge and consent of the Pandronian government, is strictly forbidden by all Federation-Klingon treaties. Your presence here constitutes a violation of the most serious order, Captain Kor."

"No doubt certain parties would consider it so," the Klingon captain replied, "if it were ever to come to their attention." His grin turned predatory. "But that will not happen. And besides," he added, affecting an attitude of mock outrage, "we are *not* here without the Pandronians' permission."

"I beg to differ," said Spock. "No one in the government mentioned anything to us about the presence of a Klingon mission on Pandro. They surely would have."

"Can be of that certain," bn Bem finished.

"That depends on who you chose to recognize as the official government, Mr. Spock," Kor pointed out pleasantly. "We happen to feel that these representatives of a free society are the legitimate representatives of the Pandronian people." He indicated the black-clad figures escorting them. "Not the illegitimate government which has its seat in the city of Tendrazin."

"Government has support of overwhelming majority of Pandronian people," an angry bn Bem protested.

"A question of figures—mere quibbling," countered Kor, obviously enjoying himself.

"How do you have the gall to call these rebels a legitimate government?" Kirk demanded to know.

"They are for free disassociation and reassociation of all Pandronian life," the Klingon explained.

bn Bem could not longer contain himself. "Means destruction of civilization!" he shouted. "Would These Mad Ones destroy all civilization on planet Pandro by having intelligent Pandronians return to unordered integrals!"

"Anarchy," Spock concurred, "would be the undeniable result." He quieted when one of the Klingons gestured warningly with his gun.

Kirk suddenly looked thoughtful. "A lot of things are becoming clear now. How the rebels managed to simulate our communicator signals and get themselves beamed aboard the *Enterprise*, for example. And if they were responsible for the breakdown of communications between the ship and ourselves, how they knew where to go and what to destroy. Klingons were helping them every step of the way." He glared at Kor.

"I would be unduly modest if I denied aiding these brave Pandronian patriots," the captain confessed. "When you do not return to your ship, Captain Kirk, your death will be attributed to the malignant Pandronian swamp life—which will in fact be the truth." Kirk didn't like the sound of that one bit.

"It is hoped," Kor continued, "that the *Enterprise* will accept that information, along with your bodies, and leave Pandro orbit."

"You don't know Scotty," Kirk warned him.

"Scotty?" The Klingon looked puzzled.

"My current officer-in-charge. He's not the kind to gracefully accept three corpses without a more detailed explanation of how they came to be that way."

"Our explanation will be sufficient, Captain," Kor assured him. "We will concoct something so reasonable, so logical, that even the most skeptical mind will accept it. The story will have the advantage that none of you three or any of these misguided Pandronians," and he indicated bn Bem and the soldiers, "will be in a position to refute it."

"If you want us dead," Spock asked, obviously confused, "why didn't you allow that creature to kill us when it had the chance?"

"A couple of good reasons," Kor replied readily. "First, the possibility did exist that the Pandronians' *fasir* might have caused the creature to permanently disassociate. We do not like our expensive experiments ruined, not even the small ones."

"Small one," McCoy muttered.

"It was still a viable subject for further experimentation," the Klingon continued, "and therefore valuable to us. More important, we could not have permitted the destruction of our most valuable Pandronian operative."

Kirk stumbled, saw that bn Bem was too shocked even for that "Valuable operative? Are you saying . . .?"

"It would appear," Spock said, looking around carefully, "that our good friend Lud eb Riss has gone elsewhere."

bn Bem uttered a long string of Pandronian curses.

"The good eb Riss," Kor informed them, "is already ahead of us, on his way to our headquarters building. He has kept with him a small, supremely efficient Imperial communicator. With this we have easily been kept apprised of your progress." The Klingon shook his head sadly.

"You should have followed his advice to turn back instead of entering the *varbox*. He did his best to dissuade you, but you fools wouldn't listen. It would have spared me some awkwardness, not to mention what it would have spared you." He sniffed.

"However, you are here. So now you must be disposed of, and in a manner to satisfy your Mr. Scotty and everyone else on the *Enterprise*, Captain Kirk."

Another several dozen meters and the brush vanished entirely, revealing a cluster of fairly large prefabricated structures of Klingon style. Despite the speed with which they had clearly been put together, the buildings conveyed an impression of solidity. Multiple antennae bristled above one structure. Kirk also took note of what appeared to be a barracks for Klingon regulars and a series of interconnected science labs.

Ample use of local vegetation had been made, and the buildings gave every indication of being well camouflaged from the air. Off to the left, across a grassy open space, light danced and flared, indicating the presence of extremely powerful energy barriers—the partial source, at least, of the radiation that had so engaged the attention and curiosity of Lieutenant Arex.

"What do you keep on the other side of those fields?" Spock inquired, nodding in their direction.

"Our important experimental subjects, of course," Kor responded. "You will have an opportunity to see them at close range before too long—under unfavorable circumstances, I fear." He looked toward the swirling, shifting barrier. "At the moment they are all down toward the far end of the island. They prefer to stay as far away from the controller as possible."

"You mentioned this controller before," McCoy reminded him.

"Yes. It is the device which produced the frequency that drove your attacker away," Kor explained, "and incidentally stunned your Pandronian friends. Our true-thinking Pandronians," and he again pointed to the silent rebels around them, "are provided by us with special devices that fit over the head and cancel out the frequency. We have located one, you see, which causes considerable discomfort to all Pandronian life forms."

"Monsters you are," bn Bem growled. "Will never the Klingon Empire now bring Pandro under its influence. Ourselves will align with the Federation."

bn Bem's declaration constituted a Pyrrhic victory at best, Kirk knew, since it was growing more and more unlikely the commander would be able return to Tendrazin to convey his recommendations to the government. Kor's threats were hardly idle. Given the severity of the treaty violation represented by this installation's presence on Pandro, he couldn't chance releasing any of them alive. That had been self-evident from the moment Kirk had identified him as a Klingon, back near the jungle's edge.

"But what's your purpose behind all this?" he asked, indicating the extensive illegal station. "Why are you risking so much to carry out a few experiments? Or are you going to let these rebels use your frequency modulator to attack Tendrazin?"

"Certainly not," Kor insisted. "That would be dangerous to us, as well as unnecessary. For one thing, our rebel friends don't really have the expertise required to operate such advanced equipment as the controller. For another, its widespread use could be easily detected by any off-world observer. The Pandronians themselves would know

immediately that the device was not developed on Pandro, and could notify any number of nosy busybodies."

"The Organians, for example?" suggested McCoy.

"There are certain parties," Kor admitted, "that might frown on such aid to one group of dissidents on an independent world. And there *is* that awkward treaty you mentioned, Captain Kirk. No, the controller is not a subtle weapon. And strong-willed Pandronians could resist it enough to fight back. Our friends are still few in number."

"Is clear now," a slightly subdued bn Bem observed. "They seek the collapse of our society for their own ends."

"Everything suddenly makes sense," Spock agreed. "The rebels destroy the present Pandronian government and take over, thus instigating a massive wave of disassociation among the planet's sole intelligent species. The Klingons, who are waiting on the sidelines, promptly step in, declare themselves selfless benefactors, and commence restoring Klingon order amid the chaos they themselves have helped to bring about." He reached for his translator, eyed Kor expectantly. But the confident Klingon captain offered no objection to Spock's use of the instrument.

Turning to the nearest black form, the first officer more or less repeated what he had just said, concluded by saying, "I am surprised you Pandronian rebels, whatever your personal beliefs, do not realize this."

"We assurances have," the Pandronian replied, "that once present unnatural government of Pandro is broken, Klingons will leave us in free disassociation. We only need permit them to establish base or two and count planet Pandro among their worlds of influence."

"If they go back on their promise to you," Spock argued, "you'll have no effective government with which to oppose them."

The Pandronian made his equivalent of a shrug. "Is disassociation and return to natural order that important is most. All else incidental is."

Spock gave up. "Rousseauian philosophy carried to a dangerous extreme, Captain."

"Mad," was bn Bem's evaluation. "All are mad."

"You will be properly dealt with soon enough, Captain Kirk," Kor told him. "But there is no great hurry, and as you have expressed an interest in our experiments here, and as to how we intend to aid our rebel associates, I see no reason why you should not go to your extinction well educated." He drew out a small control device.

"This remote is locked into the large controller inside the installation. It is convenient to be able to work out in the open, especially since our more successful experiments could never fit inside. Let's see"—he gazed down the wall of energy on their left—"I think the nearest cell will be most appropriate. The barrier also splits into individual cells for different experiments, you see."

He adjusted controls on the small box. Again the whine they had heard earlier sounded, but it was not as intense this time.

"It is now a bad headache like," bn Bem complained, wincing noticeably.

"It will get worse," Kor told him without a trace of compassion. "The various broadcast units are already operating full strength at the other end of the island, thus driving the creature toward us instead of away."

McCoy was staring intently through the energy barrier. "I don't see anything."

"Patience, Dr. McCoy," Kor advised him. "It is a large island, and the objects of our experiments must have room to move about freely."

They continued to wait in expectant silence. Except for a few intermittent flashes of fire across its fabric, the energy barrier was perfectly transparent. Most of the time there seemed to be nothing there at all, but Kirk knew that if he walked forward he would eventually encounter an invisible wall capable of stopping much more than a lone man.

As promised, the whining grew stronger, until bn Bem and the other Pandronian soldiers were once again writhing in pain. Captain Kor coldly ignored them and turned a deaf ear to McCoy's entreaties.

"Ah, it approaches. One of our noblest products to date, Captain Kirk."

"Something is certainly coming toward us, Captain," Spock announced, staring off into the distance.

Totally awed, they all gazed openmouthed as the living mountain moved toward the barrier. It dwarfed the monstrosity which had attacked them on landing at the island, made it appear a newborn puppy by comparison. Nearer it came, nearer, until it seemed it couldn't be any larger. And yet there was more of it behind.

Kirk forced himself not to flinch as the colossus halted on the other side of the barrier barely five meters away.

"We are quite safe," Kor told them. "There is a double barrier, one inside the other, in case by some unlikely mischance one should fail. Each is quite able to restrain such creatures. We take no chances with our experiments, you see."

Gazing up and up at the gargantuan thing, Kirk could understand why. It was hard to believe the mountain was alive. It was easily a hundred meters high and at least twice that in length. Comparing it again to the monster that had attacked them earlier found that smaller beast a model of symmetry compared to this thing. At least it had faintly resembled an organized creature. This sported head and necks in no special place or order. Only the legs appeared even vaguely arranged according to natural law. From time to time new eyes or ears or mouth orifices would appear along the rolling, quivering flanks, while other organs would vanish within. The creatures apparently existed in a continual state of reintegration and disassembly.

"An impressive mass," Kor observed rhetorically. "It weighs many thousands of qons." There was an evil pride in his voice as he enumerated the virtues of his crime against nature.

"This is the most mobile one of its size we have been able to produce, although the barrier restrains some much larger but not nearly so agile."

"How," McCoy wondered, staring up at the burbling mountain, "did you succeed in getting so many small integrals to combine into such a monstrosity? Even Pandronian nature operates according to some laws."

"It is a forced, artificially induced association, of course," Kor explained. "The integration is accomplished by employing a combination of controller frequencies and a hormone we have synthesized. The hormone is essentially the antithesis of that used by the Pandronians in their weapons, such as the *fasir*. That drug forces Pandronian life forms to disassociate, while our chemical impels them irresistibly to associate, to combine into larger, ever larger forms."

"It's still impossible," McCoy insisted. "How could something that big feed itself?"

"To begin with," Kor told him, "it is basically carnivorous. You can tell that from the preponderance of teeth and claws. Such a mass would ravage this entire swampland quickly enough, would eat its way across an entire planet in short order. We synthesize enough raw protein to keep our experiments like this one satiated. Of course, when we eventually succeed in developing a creature with high mobility, it will support itself when necessary."

"I would still know your purpose behind this," Spock said quietly.

"Oh, come now, Mr. Spock. I expect better of a Federation science officer. The universe is full of weapons. Not all need to be inorganic. A creature of this size," he went on as the experiment in question began to pound with awesome but silent futility against the inner force screen, "could assault a position defended even by phaser cannon. Because when one small portion of itself is destroyed, the rest continues on, thanks to its individual integrals.

"One would need to concentrate an enormous amount of firepower on it to reduce it to sizes susceptible to hand-weapon fire. By that time the creature would already have overwhelmed any field position, no matter how well emplaced and defended. The controller would see to that."

"Impractical," Kirk snapped. "Transporting several such monsters to a world in combat would be an impossible problem in logistics."

"Not at all," Kor countered. "We simply use the Pandronians own disassociation drug—in a diluted formula—thus causing the creature to disassemble into manageable sizes. These will then be transported like any breakdown weapon to the world

in question and there reassembled on the battlefield through the use of the integrator hormone and the controller.

"Naturally," the Klingon captain added after a moment's pause, "not everything is perfected as yet. The problem of high mobility, for example. But do not worry—perfection is not far off. When that comes, Pandro will be turned into an organic arsenal for the Empire!"

IX

"What," Spock inquired as they were being led toward the nearest building, "do your Pandronian allies think of your plans?"

Kor showed no hesitation in replying. "The brave Pandronians who have chosen our assistance to aid them in their struggle against the repressive autocrats of Tendrazin care nothing for what we might wish to do in the swamplands, provided we permit free association and disassociation among intelligent beings on Pandro. They know that the results of our experiments will be utilized on other worlds, not here."

Kirk tried to imagine the colossus thundering against the impenetrable barrier before them let loose on a mechanized battlefield, or dropped into the center of a large city whose inhabitants might elect to resist Klingon rule—and he shuddered.

"The reb—patriots," Kor continued, "have granted us full permission to make use of all the Pandronian lower life we require for our experiments."

"You're not going to use the frequency modulator, you're not going to unleash your abominations on this world, and yet you say you're going to help the rebels topple the government without using Imperial weaponry. I'd like to know how," Kirk wondered.

"The Pandronian government will fall of its own accord, rotten as it is," Kor announced solemnly.

"You mean, unhelpful to Klingon as it is, don't you?" said McCoy angrily.

"Actually," the Klingon captain added in less pontifical tones, "it will collapse because we aided the rebels in one slight sortie."

"The theft of the Tam Paupa—so that's how this motley assortment of fanatics managed to pull that off."

"You malign our patriots," commented a disapproving Kor. "Nevertheless, it is here. Would you like to see it?"

"The Tam Paupa . . . it here is?" a reverent bn Bem whispered, his head ringing.

"Would I lie to you?" grinned Kor.

"Would a Klingon—" McCoy began, but he was restrained by Spock. Why he couldn't have his say he didn't know, since they were going to be killed anyway; but Spock always had good reasons for employing physical restraint. The comment died aborning.

"Inside, please," Kor commanded them. They entered the building.

bn Bem expressed relief. "They have turned off the controller, This One thinks."

"I still can't believe you haven't used heavy weapons on Pandro, in contravention of still another treaty point," Kirk essayed. "How do you keep the dangerous swamp life clear of your pathway through the *varbox*, not to mention off this island?"

"That's no problem, Captain Kirk. Consider the modest experiment you encountered just inland. We let a few that size roam more or less freely about the perimeter of the island, and run some back and forth through the swamp path we've chosen with the use of controller remotes like this one." He tapped the control box at his waist.

"Most Pandronian life gladly makes haste to other regions. Those that do not help by reducing somewhat our need to produce synthesized protein." He smiled wolfishly.

"By the way, Mr. Spock, I know that you've had your communicator on open broadcast since we captured you." The first officer stiffened slightly. "It is of no consequence. Your unit could not penetrate the radiant screening around this installation. Even if it could, our operatives on board the *Enterprise* have evidently accomplished their task of disrupting your ship's communications equipment.

"By the time they have ship-to-surface capability restored, you will not be around to signal for beam-up. But your communicators will, so that you can be beamed back aboard —what's left of you, that is. I might point out that the modern

weaponry which so concerns you, Captain Kirk, still has not been used on Pandro—but only on the *Enterprise*."

He pushed through a door leading into a busy lobby. Variously uniformed Klingons mixed freely with black-clad Pandronians. "Before too long the absence of the Tam Paupa will begin to make itself felt in government circles. Soon word of its absence will breach government security and spread to the general populace.

"Panic will ensue. The government will be in complete disarray. The Pandronians' natural bellicosity will come to the fore and *cusim*—no more planetary government."

The group halted at the end of the lobby, where Commander bn Bem and the other Pandronian soldiers were separated from Kirk, Spock, and McCoy.

"If not meet again, Kirk Captain," bn Bem murmured softly, "was for This One good to have known you. For you sentiments same, Spock Commander, McCoy Doctor."

The Pandronians were led away, while the *Enterprise* officers were taken down a nearby narrow corridor. At its end was a door flanked by a pair of arrow-straight Klingon guards. Kor used an electronic key attuned to the electron levels of the lock alloy to open the door. They entered, saw a small, dimly lit room. The room itself was almost empty and as warm as the outside. Some stands holding a smattering of scientific equipment were placed around the chamber. Cases and cabinetry lined one wall. At the far end was a bench supporting a medium-sized glass case.

"In there, gentlemen," Kor advised them as he pointed toward the case, "lies the Pandronian Tam Paupa. If local records are accurate, and we have no reason to believe they lie, the most frantic search the Pandronians could mount would not locate another for at least two hundred of their years. Their government and civilization should collapse inside forty."

"I can see why it's so difficult to locate," McCoy commented, squinting. "I can't see it even now."

"The inferiority of the human form," smirked Kor.

"That may be," Spock conceded, drawing a vicious glare from McCoy, "but it does not apply to me, and I see nothing

inside that case save some shredded vegetable matter."

Kor's smirk gave way slowly to confusion as he also stared at the case. "It should be in plain view," he muttered. "Watch them closely," he directed the guards as he walked rapidly toward the bench. He looked down into the case.

"Odd." Taking a metal probe, he reached inside and stirred the bark shavings which apparently served to cushion the Tam Paupa. His stirrings grew frantic.

"Something the matter, Kor?" Kirk wondered pleasantly. But the Klingon captain's eyes had widened and he showed no sign of having heard.

"Guard—chamber guards!" Both tall Klingons who flanked the doorway stuck their heads into the chamber.

"Has anyone had access to this chamber since," and he hurriedly checked his personal chronometer, "eight *fluas* ago?"

Looking puzzled, the guard replied in Klingon, "No, Honored Captain. But we assumed duty only six *fluas* ago."

"Get back to your post!" Kor screamed. Rushing to one of the cabinets lining the left-hand wall, he thumbed an intercom switch, then spoke in Klingon, which all three officers understood reasonably well.

"Security Central . . . this is Captain Kor speaking. Who was on duty in the secure chamber as of seven *fluas* back?" A pause, then, "And for the period before that?" Another pause, followed by a violent command: "Get all of them up here immediately! I don't care if they are on rest period!" Kor's voice dropped menacingly. "Would you like your head separated from its shoulders like a Pandronian? You'll find reattaching it not so simple."

They waited while Kor glared furiously from empty case to intercom and kicked at another cabinet as if it were personally responsible for his troubles. Abruptly his attention returned as someone reported at the other end of the intercom.

"Yes—what is your name and rank? This is Captain Kor, that's who, you lower-grade moron! And stop trembling—it garbles your words. Now, think carefully, if you are capable of such: Who had access to the secure chamber where the alien Tam Paupa thing was being kept? Only him? You are certain?

Very well . . . No, you are not to be disciplined. Return to your activity previous. It matters nothing now."

He clicked off, stared blankly at the floor.

"Well?" Kirk prompted, unable to keep silent. Kor did not look up immediately.

"I had wondered why eb Riss had not come along to enjoy this victory," the Klingon murmured with barely controlled fury. "It is now clear he was planning one of his own."

"Such loyalty does a Klingon inspire among its minions," McCoy whispered, soft enough so that Kor didn't hear. In any case, the captain had other matters on his mind as he activated the intercom once again.

"Stables? Yes, I suspected. Who could have guessed? Prepare the others for emergency run. Yes, immediately." A quick flip transferred him to a different department. "Security Central—this is Captain Kor. I want a full squad of our Pandronian allies and an Imperial platoon at the stables—yes, fully armed. I don't care what Headquarters will say if we have to use energy weapons—the Tam Paupa's been stolen. Yes, by Lud eb Riss, our"—he paused, then concluded, his voice dripping venom—"most trusted contact in the Pandronian government." He flipped off the intercom, faced a curious but not displeased triumvirate of Federation officers.

"The traitor has taken a *coryat*, which is capable of negotiating the swamps. There is only one way he could run, and that is through the pathway cleared by our experimental creatures. But we will catch him and I will bring him back with me—alive, to know the exquisite refinements of Klingon justice."

Still under guard, they were led from the empty room. In passing, Kor gave an order to one of the chamber guards. "Get onto the intercom. I want all the captured Pandronians brought to the front entryway, even if interrogation has begun. I have no time to go to them in the holding pens."

"It shall be done, Honored One," the guard responded.

Moments later they were back at the entrance to the headquarters building, where they were soon joined by a troop of tired, worried-looking Pandronian soldiers led by Ari bn Bem. Pandronian rebels kept them packed tightly together.

Kor went straight to bn Bem. "I must know what Lud eb Riss is likely to do; therefore I must know what sort of person you consider him to be."

The commander looked uncertain, but replied offhandedly, "He is a traitor to his race; what more is there to know of him?"

"He has restolen the Tam Paupa," Kor explained, "and is even now riding for Tendrazin. What is he likely to do there?"

At this information a strange sort of verbal bubbling poured in increasing waves from bn Bem's mouth. Since the common soldiers could not understand Klingon, he translated Kor's announcement for them. Immediately they began to mimic his bubbling noises, some bubbling so hard they could barely keep their feet. Their heads and middle sections shifted on their bodies as if they were coming apart. Kirk recognized it from previous experience with bn Bem as the Pandronian equivalent of laughter.

Captain Kor was not amused. He drew a small sidearm from his waist. It was clearly not Pandronian in origin and differed also from the hand weapons held by the Pandronian rebels. It very much looked like a poorly disguised, standard-naval-issue Imperial energy weapon.

Kor pointed it at bn Bem's head. "I will burn you integral by integral where you stand if such a disrespectful outburst occurs again. Tell *that* to your subordinates."

bn Bem dutifully translated and the laughter died down. Despite the threat, the commander couldn't prevent himself from declaring, with some satisfaction, "So have the traitors betrayed been. Is for justice too perverted, but is pleasing still."

"You should choose your coconspirators with greater care, Captain," Spock suggested, noticing the Klingon's finger tightening on the trigger of his weapon. Kor, properly distracted, stared back at Spock. "We are now presented with an additional question of interest: To be precise, who here was using whom?"

"Shut up, you," Kor ordered him warningly. Forgetting that he was about to kill bn Bem, he directed another question at

the Pandronian. "What can we expect eb Riss to try to do with the Tam Paupa?"

"To return it was clearly never of his intention," bn Bem surmised. "By now should high council be incapable of acting with a Tam Paupa-less premier, eb Riss intelligent is always, but now appears That One more intelligent than any believed. Also cunning, also calculating.

"This One would guess Tendrazin That One will enter surreptitiously. Will move freely, as is his rank, in government central. With aid of Tam Paupa, eb Riss will have own abilities enhanced. This One believes he could himself have anointed premier."

"The shortsighted imbecile," Kor rumbled. "Doesn't he realize we can have him removed the same way we removed the Tam Paupa from that doddering old fool who is the present head of government?"

"That may not be as easy as it was the first time," Spock felt compelled to point out, moved by the logic of it. "The present premier and his supporters had no idea there were Klingons scheming on his world, whereas eb Riss knows precisely where you're located and what you're up to. He used you all along."

"To make himself supreme ruler of Pandro," Kirk continued when Spock had finished. "If his plan succeeds and he makes himself premier, and if this brain-boosting Tam Paupa is all its cracked up to be, then I don't see how you can give him much trouble. This rebellion you're supporting will fail and you'll have to renegotiate your position on Pandro—this time bidding against the Federation. I know eb Riss's type—hell be interested in joining up with the side that offers *him* the most, not the one that promises the best for Pandro."

"There'll be no such trouble if we catch him first," Kor reminded them sharply. His weapon came around to point at Kirk. "In any event, you three will not be around to witness the eventual outcome. I see no reason for putting off your demise any longer.

"You will be fed to one of the experiments. I could burn you here, but I dislike waste and inefficiency. Your partially consumed bodies will be rescued and at least one communicator activated. We will lower our screens long

enough for your ship to locate your communicator signal and beam up your remains. They will accept the evidence of the marks on your corpses, and there will be none to dispute this." He gestured meaningfully with the weapon. "Outside, please."

Devoid of expression, the three men and the Pandronians were marched toward the exit. The guards at the wide doorway moved aside smartly and the transparent panels slid apart to let them pass.

Kirk had barely taken a step outside when a tremendous explosion slammed him hard to the ground. As he was trying to recover from the initial shock of the concussion, a second explosion occurred. Glass and metal fragments whistled over his head, followed instantly by a series of nonstop, slightly smaller eruptions.

"Spock, Bones—run for the rafts!"

They were on their feet then, nearly falling several times as continuous blasts shook the earth all around them, though the actual explosions came from behind. Kirk looked around, almost falling again, and saw bn Bem and the rest of the Pandronian soldiers following. In the confusion which had thrown everyone to the ground the well-trained Pandronian troops had reacted more professionally than the Klingon-led rebels. They had overpowered their guards at the cost of several casualties.

Now only Captain Kor and two Klingon guards remained outside, for the initial explosion had collapsed the entryway into the main building. Seeing that he was outmanned and now outgunned, Kor had time to visit a look of helpless rage on Kirk. It turned to panic when another eruption ripped the air behind them.

"The power station!" Kirk could hear him yell desperately. "Get to the backups quickly or everything is lost!"

An ear-splitting moaning sounded from behind and to the right as they ran. Kirk saw that a second abomination had come up alongside the first. Even as he watched, both horrors suddenly slipped five meters closer to the Klingon installation.

"What the hell's going on?!" McCoy shouted. His answer came from the scurrying blue bi-ped now running on his left.

"Told all This One that Lud eb Riss's cunning was great," bn Bem told him breathlessly as they raced into the jungle again. "Expected the traitor some pursuit from Klingons. Would guess he left charges to create confusion and panic among them."

"I heard Kor yell something about a power station," Kirk told the others, gasping for breath as they hurried along. The rafts should be close now.

"That would cause panic indeed, Captain," Spock concurred with enviable ease as he strode along nearby. "It means that the double-force barrier the Klingons have erected will come down, and that the central frequency-modulator installation will also be inoperative. It follows that the results of the Klingon biological experiments will soon be free of all restraints."

"Talk about Frankenstein unbound," McCoy panted.

"Frankenstein unbound? What is that?" Commander bn Bem wanted to know.

"I'll explain later," McCoy replied, "but basically it's a Terran catch phrase meaning you'd better run like mad!"

Trees rose all around them now. Kirk stole a last glimpse backward. Energy bolts were beginning to rise from the smoking rubble that had been the Klingon station. Kirk couldn't see what they were firing at.

But he had a brief sight of one target as they reached the rafts. It raised three legs and four tentacles, each as big around as a shuttlecraft, and brought them down on the exterior of the main building they had been so briefly imprisoned in.

It was not an educated assault, but it was effective. The structure simply disappeared beneath thousands of kilograms of sheer mass. Screams began to sound above the noise of battle.

Every so often a Klingon energy beam would strike one of the several colossuses now assaulting the installation and burn a hole in it. A section or two of the creature would fall away, blackened and burning, without slowing its former body in the least.

"The Klingons are becoming victims of their own experiment," he noted aloud. "Poetic Justice."

"The justice will be more than poetic, Captain," Spock reminded him, "if eb Riss also had the foresight to destroy our rafts as he retreated."

But when they broke through the last thick brush above the narrow beach and tumbled gratefully to the water's edge, the two unsightly craft were exactly where they had been left, grounded on the gentle slope. To Kirk they were as beautiful as a Federation destroyer.

"It may be, Captain, that eb Riss was unable to move the heavy craft by himself, or he may not have wished to delay himself by doing so," Spock theorized, even as he was lending his own muscle to that of four Pandronians as they fought to slide one raft into the swamp sludge.

"Or he could have expected us to be trapped in the explosions," McCoy countered. "Captain Kor couldn't have chosen a better time to feed us to his pets."

Both rafts slid buoyantly into the murk. No group of professional oarsmen could have moved those two clumsy constructions faster through the water than did the three men and squadron of bedraggled Pandronian troops.

"Look!" McCoy shouted, pointing behind them. They had already put some distance between themselves and the island.

Kirk turned, saw an enormous elephantine neck stretched perhaps a hundred and fifty meters into the sky. It towered far above the tallest of the island trees.

Six mouths formed the terminus, each filled with teeth the size of concrete pillars. Two of the jaws were crunching sections of metal wall, while another was devouring a thick cylindrical shape, munching on the hard formed metal as though it were a cracker.

An eye-searing flash ensued, followed by a rolling explosion. The momentary flare lit the swamp around them and threw everyone on the rafts into eerie shadow.

"That was a fuel tank, chemical type," Kirk finally declared assuredly as he looked back.

The huge waving neck was swaying wildly about. All six mouths and the gargoylish head they had been mounted in were gone, as was about twenty meters of upper neck. But the blackened, charred stump continued to flail about without ceasing.

"The danger now imminent is," bn Bem brooded as he regarded the now distant horror. "All will proceed to act as would any meat-eater. All must now obtain own enormous masses of food to survive.

"*Varboxites* will flee in all directions from them," the commander explained. "Creatures' senses will direct massive forms to largest mass in region which flees not."

"What would that be?" Spock asked, already more than suspecting the answer, bn Bem gazed at each of them in turn before replying.

"In Tendrazin city, is naturally."

"I wonder if eb Riss foresaw that also," Kirk muttered. "Can they get through the swamp?"

"Are you kidding, Jim?" McCoy looked back toward the island, which was now long since out of sight. "It would take nothing short of a thermonuclear demolition charge or a ship's phaser banks to slow any one of those babies."

"Mr. Spock?" Kirk inquired. Spock already had his communicator out, but shook his head after several tries.

"The interference shield generated by the Klingons has vanished, Captain, but there is still no indication we are being received by the *Enterprise*."

That meant that the damage inflicted by the Pandronian boarders still hadn't been repaired, Kirk reflected. They were on their own, then.

"Is hard to believe eb Riss would plan so well and not see results of destroying Klingon aliens' control machines," bn Bem was musing. "Must That One have some plan for turning creatures from Tendrazin."

"You still don't seem to grasp the magnitude of what eb Riss has done, Commander," Kirk advised him. "Turning on his own people, then turning on those who helped him—I wouldn't put it past him to sit idly by while the Klingons' monsters ravage the whole city. Then he could make himself

surpreme ruler of Pandro without worry of any interference whatsoever—not with the seat of government obliterated."

"This One cannot believe such crime even of such as eb Riss," a horrified bn Bem replied. And then he appeared to wilt slightly. "Still, has he participated in theft of Tam Paupa twice. Loyalty must remain only to self. Can This One sorrowfully put nothing past him. It may be that eb Riss is madder even than the rebels he once helped."

A shout sounded from the other raft, bn Bem looked attentive as he exchanged words with a particularly bedraggled Pandronian soldier. Then Kirk recognized the other speaker. It was the head tracker, the Pandronian who had led them to the edge of the swamp.

At the moment, he was gesturing at a passing tree. "Broken small branches and missing leaves," bn Bem informed the curious men. "All signs of a *coryat* taking sustenance while on the run.

"Could be another creature have been made, but tracker thinks sure a *coryat*. Is good sign that eb Riss traveling same direction."

"Any chance of our overtaking him?" Kirk asked.

bn Bem looked sad. "*Coryat* built for speed, can outrun *zintar*. And travels much faster than raft."

There was one more surprise waiting for them when the rafts grounded on the mainland the following day. The *zintars* were arranged in a circle, their three handlers camped behind the protective bulks and armed with dart sidearms.

bn Bem conversed with their own handler, ab Af, and learned that eb Riss had indeed been by this way. He had tried to surprise the group, but the handlers detected him too soon and he passed them by, presumably on his way to Tendrazin.

"eb Riss decided not to challenge three handlers and trained *zintars*," bn Bem concluded.

"Why should he risk himself?" McCoy declared. "He got what he really wanted—the Tam Paupa. The Klingons won't give him any trouble; they'll be lucky if any of them get off that island alive. And he knows no one can beat him to the capital."

"Can but try," bn Bem countered grimly. "We ride, gentlemen."

The situation was explained to the *zintar* handlers as the great tame animals were being mounted. Soon they were traveling at a startling pace back toward Tendrazin.

Somewhere within that huge old city, man and Pandronian alike knew, Pandro's greatest traitor in its civilized history had by now secreted himself.

X

Halfway back to the city Kirk nearly fell from his saddle in his haste to acknowledge the suddenly beeping communicator at his waist. The steady jounce of a *zintar* at the gallop nearly caused him to drop it under thundering feet—but he held on.

"Mine is also signaling, Captain," Spock reported.

"And mine, Jim!" added an excited McCoy.

Kirk took a deep breath, flipped the cover back, and spoke hesitantly into the pickup. "This is the captain speaking."

"Lieutenant Uhura still acting in command, sir. Mr. Scott remains partially incapacitated by the Pandronian low-grade stun beam. The effects have almost worn off, though. Nurse Chapel is confident there will be no permanent aftereffects."

"And the Pandronian boarders?" Kirk wondered.

"They succeeded in completely disabling our communications, Captain," she informed them as Kirk ducked a low-hanging vine. "Somehow they knew exactly where to go and how to get there. I don't understand. I thought the Pandronians weren't that advanced."

"They've had plenty of the wrong kind of help, Lieutenant," Kirk told her. "There are Klingons operating on Pandro—or, there were."

"Klingons!" A moment's silence, then, "But I thought the Pandronians hadn't decided—"

"They haven't, Lieutenant. This installation was present without either the approval or knowledge of the duly constituted Pandronian government. I'll explain later. For now, suffice to say that the Klingons had some typical Klingon ideas about exploiting the peculiar Pandronian ecology for their own uses. But we don't have to worry about them any more," he finished grimly. "Though you might keep a sharp watch for Klingon warships. Their base here had to be supplied periodically from outside.

"The ecology they played with is now running wild. According to Commander bn Bem, natural instinct will probably lead the animals involved to move toward the largest stable concentration of life on this part of the planet, which would be the Pandronian capital city. Now, what about other damage and casualties?"

"Several other paralyzed security personnel are also showing signs of recovery, Captain," Uhura reported crisply. "Ship damage appears to have been limited to our communications facilities. Under Mr. Scott's supervision, though, we have manged to rig a ship-to-surface link sufficient to get in touch with you—though Mr. Scott insists he can't guarantee how long it will last. Do you want us to beam you up, Captain?"

Kirk was considering a reply when Uhura broke in again. "Captain, Mr. Sulu has sensor contact with another vessel." A long, tense pause while they waited helplessly for further information.

"What's happening up there, Uhura?" Kirk finally called, unable to stand the silence.

"I was awaiting identification, Captain," came the reply. "Klingon cruiser escorting a cargo ship. We can't beam them and they're not beaming us."

"Probably surprised to see you," Kirk ventured. "Their captain's undoubtedly wondering at the lack of response from the surface, not to mention the presence of the *Enterprise*. I suspect he'll remain silent in orbit, hoping we'll leave—which we will, eventually. But keep a close watch on them, and report any indication of impending hostilities, Lieutenant."

This was all he needed—a Klinglon cruiser confronting the *Enterprise* at this crucial moment. He had to decide—did they beam up to join the ship, or remain to try to help the Pandronians?

The Klingons were obviously here to supply their ruined base. When a party from the cruiser finally beamed down into the wreckage, Kirk was willing to bet the cruiser captain would head for home with a report, rather than chance a pitched battle with a Federation ship for no particular reason. But he couldn't be certain—not until the Klingon left orbit.

But while it remained, the *Enterprise* couldn't use its ship's weaponry to halt the attack on Tendrazin. That would put her in an untenable tactical position which would be like waving a red flag in front of the Klingon cruiser. No, they would have to try something else to halt the lumbering assault on the city, at least until the standoff above was broken somehow.

"What do you think, Spock, Bones? Should we beam up?"

Spock shook his head once, quickly, and McCoy grumbled without looking at Kirk, "The least we can do is try to fix the mess the Klingons have made of Pandro."

"Stand by in the Transporter Room, Lieutenant," Kirk announced into his communicator, "but we're not ready to beam up just yet. We've got something we have to do here first. We'll keep you advised."

Ahead, Commander Ari bn Bem executed the Pandronian equivalent of a smile.

"What about the Pandronians who boarded the ship?" Kirk asked.

"We're holding them in the security section of Sick Bay, Captain," came the reply from above. "No matter how small they can subdivide, I don't think they can slip through a force screen. They refuse to discuss their mission, but they admit to being part of some kind of fanatical Pandronian society."

"Fanatical doesn't half say it, Lieutenant," Kirk told her. "Keep them locked up, and whatever you do, don't let one of them get behind anybody."

"No chance of that now, sir," she assured him. "I only wish we'd known their true capabilities when they first beamed aboard."

"This seems to be the day to learn all about Pandronian capabilities," was Kirk's response. "The Klingons learned the hard way. Kirk out"

"*Enterprise* out"

Once they entered the government stables, bn Bem was first off a *zintar*. He waited impatiently for Kirk and the others to dismount.

"We must hurry to the government chambers and convey our information to the premier and the council. Action must in effect be put to wrest the Tam Paupa from the traitor eb Riss."

Alternately walking and running, they followed the commander through the winding corridors of the government building. A queried courier told them that the premier was presently meeting in session with the full high council of both Tendrazin city and planet Pandro.

"Are all in private meeting chamber," the dazed courier called as the commander and his three aliens rushed by her.

bn Bem led them upward. Eventually they confronted a high portal guarded by four armed Pandronians in purple and puce uniforms.

The officer in charge barred their way. "No one to be admitted is," he said resolutely. "High Council and premier in special meeting are."

"I am a high commander myself and envoy extraordinary to United Federation of Planets," bn Bem announced with dignity. "Has This One information vital to safety of city Tendrazin and all planet Pandro."

"Nevertheless," the officer replied, "This One's orders say clearly that we are to—"

"This One claims extraordinary over ordinary," bn Bem shot back, "on all integrals mine and rank of high commander."

"Overranked and absolved is This One," the guard admitted, executing a half bow. "Be it on your association, I admit you." He moved aside, directing the other guards to do likewise.

The door was shoved inward and bn Bem strode importantly into the chamber with the Federation contingent close behind.

Most of the room was taken up by a huge table in the form of an eight-pointed star. High-ranking Pandronians of varying age and venerability were seated at seven of the points. At the star-point farthest from the doorway sat the premier, who abruptly rose and stared at them in shock.

"You," the new premier of Pandro exclaimed, the Tam Paupa positioned securely on his head, "how did you escape from—?"

Lud eb Riss suddenly grew aware he was on the verge of saying too much. Slowly he assumed his seat again and left the startled gaping to the rest of the representatives in the chamber. Those exhalted Pandronians were no less stunned than the new arrivals. bn Bem's hastily composed speech and declaration of emergency was totally forgotten.

"Lud eb Riss," he was finally able to stammer, "This One under arrest declares you as traitor to all Pandro intelligences!" Turning, the commander called back through the still-open door. "Officer of the guard." The officer who had first prevented them from entering came into the chamber, followed by two of his subordinates.

bn Bem pointed across the table. "Arrest Lud eb Riss, the usurper."

"Remain at your posts," eb Riss countered in a new, strangely commanding tone.

"Note the altered voice, Captain," Spock whispered to Kirk. "One of the benefits of wearing the Tam Paupa, apparently. It magnifies more than the decision-making ability of whoever wears it. eb Riss is clearly more than he was. It is no wonder the Pandronians have placed such faith in whoever the Tam Paupa was on."

The officer of the guard hesitated, took a step backward. eb Riss appeared satisfied and to be gaining confidence with every moment.

"What have you done, eb Riss," Kirk demanded to know, "with the real premier, Kau afdel Kaun?"

It wasn't eb Riss but one of the councilors seated at the table who supplied an answer. "Have you heard not? Old afdel Kaun died from the effort of trying to handle the affairs of his office without the aid of the Tam Paupa. The strain was for him too much. The final dissolution his body met these two days past." He gestured toward the far corner of the table.

"Is now Lud eb Riss, wearer of Tam Paupa, premier designate of planet Pandro, to be confirmed this day itself."

"But you can't make him your new premier!" an outraged McCoy insisted. "He's the one who's responsible for the theft of the Tam Paupa in the first place."

Expressions and reactions differed markedly from human ones, but there was no mistaking the shock that McCoy's startling accusation caused at the table.

Slowly, the attention of every councilor shifted to the premier's chair.

eb Riss appeared only momentarily shaken by the direct charge, but with the assistance of the Tam Paupa he quickly recovered his confidence—as would be demanded of any planetary leader in such a situation. Kirk had already realized they were not arguing against a single Pandronian, but a Pandronian plus one.

"This a monstrous lie is," eb Riss declaimed with certitude. "Has This One only just risked life and integration to return and warn of danger to city of Tendrazin from beasts created by alien enemy Klingons?"

It had to be the Tam Paupa's assistance again, Kirk realized in frustration, which had induced in eb Riss the brilliant ploy of both denying McCoy's charge and stealing their chance to warn the council of the impending threat at the same time.

"Lies, lies, more and greater lies!" a near-violent bn Bem objected, waving his arms so hard that his middle torso occasionally hopped clear off his hips. "Not only a usurper and blasphemer is eb Riss, but was he himself who cooperated with Klingon aliens and them enabled to produce their monsters on Pandro."

"See how at moment of most crucial need for confidence and stability they dissension and disruption attempt to sow," boomed eb Riss with sly power. "Commander bn Bem has by his stay with Federation aliens been corrupted. Must he for his own good be imprisoned.

"As for alien life forms, they no better than Klingons are. Only different in shapes and colors. They too wish use of Pandro for their own unknowable ends. Must they be executed immediately, to prevent false panicking of Tendrazin population with their wild, detrimental stories."

"This One—This One knows not what to do, which ones to believe," stuttered Dav pn Hon, the most experienced and respected of all the high councillors. "Wears eb Riss the true

Tam Paupa, which knowledge and forthrightness guarantees. Says eb Riss one thing."

His gaze swung speculatively to the angry group of aliens fronted by the honorable Commander bn Bem.

"Produces Commander Ari bn Bem outworld aliens for confirmation of most grave charges. Says bn Bem one thing." He performed a Pandronian gesture indicative of utter uncertainty. "Who is This One, who is council to believe?"

Murmurs of agreement and similar confusion were heard around the polished table.

eb Riss addressed the wavering silence. "Believe in which person you must," he told them, "but whatever you believe, cannot you deny the true Tam Paupa." When this didn't produce an outburst of acclaim, eb Riss played his trump card.

"Anyways, is any present who can offer means of stopping creatures both sides say soon will Tendrazin be attacking?"

More worried mutterings from the assembled councillors. Now their attention shifted from one another to the four figures standing before the doorway.

bn Bem turned to the Federation officers. "Well, Kirk Captain," he asked hopefully, "can you help us?"

"I don't know," Kirk admitted. "Just a moment." Activating his communicator, he turned away from the curious assembly and whispered into the pickup. "Kirk to *Enterprise*."

"*Enterprise*," came the reply, toned to softness by Kirk's adjustment of the volume. "Uhura here, Captain."

"Is the you-know-what still you-know-where, Lieutenant?"

"It hasn't changed position, Captain," Uhura responded, matching Kirk's deliberate lack of specifics with some fast thinking of her own. There was a definite reason behind it. If eb Riss knew there was a Klingon cruiser standing off the planet, the situation could become twice as difficult as it already was.

"Thanks, Lieutenant. Kirk out."

"What about one of your dart-throwing mechanisms such as the *fasir*?" Spock inquired. "Would they not be effective against the Klingon creatures?"

"Perhaps, Spock Commander," bn Bem admitted. "But is not weapons a problem. Is hard for us to produce the dissolution drug. Is not nearly enough in supplies of Tendrazin, not in many cities, to stop creatures so big. Was not ever expected by us to have to fight such impossible accretions of integrals."

"You see," exclaimed eb Riss, taking quick advantage of his opponent's indecision, "they are against their own lies helpless, as well as against assault which soon will come against us. Whereas This One," he reminded them grandiosely, "who wears Tam Paupa is only one who can Tendrazin save. Only This One.

"But will This One save city," he warned them, meeting the eyes of every individual council member in turn, "only if am confirmed immediately and irrevocably by high council as new premier of planet Pandro." And he grinned a Pandronian grin, not at the thoughtful councillors but across the broad table at the anguished face of Commander Ari bn Bem.

"Must do something to stop the traitor, Kirk Captain," the commander pleaded. "Is nothing you can do?"

"Circumstances prevent us from using ship's weapons, Commander," Kirk told him sadly. "As for anything we could beam down, I just don't know. I don't have authorization to use heavy weapons on Pandro's surface, and I don't want to duplicate a Klingon treaty violation by doing so. Besides, I'm not sure a phaser cannon could stop those creatures, and transmitting enough ship's power to be effective would put a strain on the *Enterprise*'s systems which might prove fatal if certain other parties elect to make trouble. I just don't know." He turned to his first officer.

"I am truly sorry, Captain, but it appears we must make a choice whether or not to use modern energy weapons, whether to risk weakening the *Enterprise* or saving Tendrazin."

"What about duplicating the frequency used by the Klingons in their controller?" Kirk wanted to know.

Spock quashed that possibility instantly. "Highly unlikely, Captain. We would have to achieve in a few hours what Klingon scientists clearly took a considerable period to accomplish. We have no idea what the frequency in question

was. To locate it requires more time than we have, by a substantial margin.

"Of course, we could have an extraordinary stroke of good luck and hit upon the precise frequency right off, but I consider that a possibility too distant to be worth considering. We must come up with a different methodology."

Kirk looked over at McCoy, who was apparently deep in thought. "You working on an idea, Bones?"

"I was just thinking, Jim. The Pandronians, according to Commander bn Bem, might be able to handle this attack with their own weapons. All they need is a sufficient supply of the dissolution drug. Well, I've been producing drugs in large quantity all my life. I don't see why the *Enterprise*'s organic synthesizers couldn't turn out all the drug the Pandronians need.

"Even so," he added cautiously, "I'm not sure massive doses of the Pandronian drug will be enough to reduce to harmlessness what's coming this way. The commander's right when he says it will take one helluva lot of the stuff poured into those hulks. They might still be big and strong enough by the time they reach the city to cause a lot of damage."

"Is true," bn Bem agreed woefully. "Even best efforts with drug could not reduce last two creatures we saw while leaving *varbox*."

"There's got to be a way to make it work," Kirk insisted, trying to will a solution into being. "There's *got* to be!"

"For yourselves see," eb Riss cried in triumph, "admit the aliens their helplessness to save city. Cannot they preserve you. Only can This One. For This One wears the Tam Paupa!"

"It just doesn't look possible, Jim," McCoy insisted. "Whichever way the Pandronians turn they're faced with a dog-eat-dog situation."

"Bones, if we risk transmitting ship's power and you-know-who decides to attack, then we . . . we . . ."

He paused. Enlightenment dawned on his face.

Spock's eyebrows went up slightly. "Whatever your immediate thought, Captain, I do not see how Terran canines can be involved in our present situation in any way."

"It's not that, Spock, it's—" Kirk started to explain, but the same thought apparently struck McCoy.

"It just might work, Jim."

The first officers eyebrows advanced to his hairline. "Terran canines *are* involved? Captain, I don't understand what—"

"It's just an expression, Spock," Kirk told him offhandedly, his attention on McCoy. "You're sure you can synthesize the dissolution drug the Pandronians use, Bones?"

"Unless its a much more complex protein chain than I suspect, I don't see any reason why not."

"And in sufficient quantities?"

McCoy nodded. "As much as is needed."

"Captain, may I point out again the size and flexibility of the creatures the Klingons produced."

"I'm not thinking of destroying them before they reach the city, Mr. Spock. It seems clear we haven't that capability. What I *am* thinking of is moving them to the point of least resistance."

"If you are thinking, Captain," the first officer declared, "of changing the path of these creatures the way we did the dranzer stampede on Ribal Two, I don't believe it will work. The situation here is not analogous. We are dealing with only a few colossal creatures instead of millions of smaller ones.

"Furthermore, there is no species link between our attackers as there was on Ribal. Each one is different from the next, and there exists nothing like a chosen leader."

"I'm not talking about trying to run them in a circle like we did on Ribal, Spock. Obviously, if what Captain Kor told us about their protein requirements is true, nothing could possibly turn them from the nearest large, stable source of meat, which is Tendrazin.

"But if we can mount enough dart launchers on either side of their approach path and keep a steady quantity of the drug raining into them, we should at least be able to force the two creatures on the flanks to move away from the source of irritation. In other words, they'll continue to advance, but packed closer and closer together. Then if we can shove them tight enough, the combination of pressure, threat, and the

presence of so much protein so close should unnerve them enough to start attacking *each other*."

"I wish I had your confidence, Jim," McCoy told him, "but I must admit your idea has a chance."

Kirk looked for confirmation from his science chief. "Well, Mr. Spock?"

"On the surface it seems plausible, Captain," Spock admitted. "Yet," and he was straining to gather in a fleeting thought, "something about the very concept troubles me, and I cannot say precisely why."

"Have you any better suggestions?" Kirk asked hopefully.

"No, Captain, I do not. And my worry is not grounded in fact. The idea *seems* reasonable."

"A fool's plan," snorted the transmogrified eb Riss. "Can never work. Only This One can save you all. Must make your decision now."

"Just a minute!" Kirk shouted as several council members seemed about to speak. "You don't have to make your final decision yet. eb Riss is a traitor of hardly believable proportions."

"So say you," injected a solemn Dav pn Hon.

"But what if we're telling the truth?" Kirk argued anxiously. "Give our idea a chance. If we fail, and eb Riss is truly as omnipotent now as he'd like you to believe, then he can still save you."

Trapped by his own vanity, eb Riss was forced not to refute Kirk's appraisal of his self-proclaimed abilities.

"Dr. McCoy, Mr. Spock, and I think we can force these monsters to turn on themselves," Kirk went on determinedly. "If we fail in this, you can always turn to whatever miracle eb Riss has planned. But you must give us this chance! Afterwards, when the threat to Tendrazin has been eliminated, you can consider the question of who should be your next premier without having to do so under pressure. Isn't that worth striving for?"

Rumbles of uncertainty from the assembled councillors, ending in grudging assent.

"And as long as we're on the subject of saving Tendrazin," Kirk shot across at eb Riss, "I'd like to know just what your plan for saving the city is, anyway."

eb Riss sat up straight in his seat and folded his arms. On his head the Tam Paupa, a metallic green circle surrounded by decorative projections and sparkling cabochons, shone bright in the light from overhead.

"Surely, Kirk Captain, you cannot think This One will reveal idea for use until is confirmed as premier? This One will wait as need be until high council comes to realization of truth."

"Yeah," snapped McCoy, "even if that turns out to be too late to save Tendrazin."

eb Riss made a Pandronian shrug. "Has This One presented offer to council."

"Look," McCoy muttered, "why doesn't someone just walk up to him and yank that holy crown whatsis off his rotten head?"

"Is against all Pandronian law and histories," Dav pn Hon informed them. "Would any to take Tam Paupa from who is wearing it, That One would be as guilty as whoever first stole it."

"And never mind that the one who stole it is now wearing it," a frustrated Kirk muttered. "Try to get around *that* one." He glared at eb Riss. "Your treachery is worse than a Klingon's, eb Riss. I believe you'd sacrifice the entire capital city to further your own personal ambition. Human history has had its share of types like you."

"This One not threatened by alien comparisons," eb Riss declared with dignity. "This One has passed point where personal wishes matter. Must do what must do, and means this insisting on my terms. Tendrazin not in This One's hands now." He eyed Kirk challengingly. "In your hands, Kirk Captain."

"Have we no choice," another councillor lamented. He faced Kirk. "If you fail, Kirk Captain, we must turn to eb Riss, traitor though maybe he be, in hope of salvation. This is our way."

"I understand, sir," Kirk replied soberly. He activated his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise* . . . Transporter Room."

"Transporter Room on standby—Ensign M'degu on station, sir."

"We're ready to beam aboard, Ensign. We—" He paused as a hand came down on his shoulder.

bn Bem looked hard at him. "This One would go with you, Kirk Captain." The commander was fighting to control his emotions. "To be of assistance to McCoy Doctor." He indicated his own waist band and its pouches. "Have in sidearm and weapon case several doses of dissolution drug. Will need to duplicate." He looked to his left.

"Is sufficient, McCoy Doctor?" he inquired, flipping open the case to show the half dozen darts within.

McCoy glanced at them, nodded. "Is sufficient, bn Bem Commander." He smiled broadly. Like Kirk's and Spock's, McCoy's opinion of the commander had come a long way since the latter had first set foot on the *Enterprise*.

"Besides," bn Bem added, glaring back across the table, "if remain here knowing what This One knows, may do something fatal to self and other party. Would be dangerous to leave This One behind. Might violently disassemble eb Riss, even though fight could end with Tam Paupa damaged."

"I see your point," Kirk said knowingly. His voice was directed to the communicator again. "Ensign, there will be four in the beam-up party. Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy, myself, and Commander bn Bem. We're localized," he added as all four moved close together, "so don't worry about catching someone else. The transporter is holding the commander's pattern."

"I have it, sir," the transporter operator reported. "Stand by."

As the high council watched silently, the four figures were engulfed in a storm of dissolution no Pandronian life form could match. Then they were gone, leaving the councillors to stare at one another—and with mixed emotions at the calm, assured form of the mentally inspired Lud eb Riss.

Once back on board ship, McCoy wasted no time, but set to work immediately with several of the ship's chemists and Spock's assistance to synthesize the dissolution drug

contained in bn Bem's dart-syringes. As expected—and hoped—the drug turned out to be a comparatively simple organic construction, which the *Enterprise*'s organic fabricator had no trouble reproducing.

With production underway, Kirk was able to devote some time to considering the Klingon threat. Actually, it was a threat only on the basis of past incidents, for the cruiser sat close by its companion cargo vessel and offered no contact. That was fine with Kirk. Now if the Klingons would only cooperate by staying put and letting their minds puzzle over what had happened to their secret ground installation, he might just have enough time to work everything out.

It was while he was dividing his thoughts between the enemy cruiser on the main viewscreen and the timetable Spock had worked out for the approach of the creatures to Tendrazin that bn Bem approached him, leaning over the command chair with an apologetic expression on his blue face. "Your pardon for disturbing thoughts, Kirk Captain."

"That's all right, Commander. I wasn't having any brainstorms anyway. What can I do for you?"

bn Bem, for the first time since Kirk had known him, seemed to be having difficulty finding the right words. Finally, he murmured, "Is Pandronian problem but seems insoluble by methods Pandronian."

"If you're still worried about what we'll do if the drugs fail to act as planned—" Kirk started to say, but the commander waved him off.

"Is not that. If McCoy Doctor can produce enough dissolution drug and if your plan succeeds, will still remain matter of traitor eb Riss having possession of Tam Paupa. He will not give it up voluntarily."

Kirk didn't understand. "But once we've disposed of the threat to Tendrazin created by the Klingons' experiments, then can't the council deal with eb Riss without fear?"

"You still not comprehend fully importance of Tam Paupa, Kirk Captain," bn Bem tried to explain. "Remind you that no Pandronian can take Tam Paupa by force from whoever wears it. Also, consider that Pandronian who wears Tam Paupa is best suited for making decisions on all Pandro."

"Are you saying," Kirk muttered in disbelief, "that in spite of what we've told them about what eb Riss has done, the high council could still possibly confirm him as premier?"

"This One really knows not," bn Bem confessed worriedly. "Never in memory has such a series of circumstances followed. So high councillors face unique situation.

"Is merely advising you that your help may further be required before certainty of planet Pandro's alliance with your Federation is. As you said, eb Riss if he survives will for himself strongest bargain drive."

"I guess we've been underestimating the spiritual importance of this Tam Paupa all along," Kirk mused, "while concerning ourselves only with its biological effects."

"There may be a way, Captain, to part the Tam Paupa from eb Riss." Kirk looked across to where Spock was regarding bn Bem thoughtfully.

"According to the commander," Kirk reminded his science officer, "Pandronian law forbids the removal by force of the Tam Paupa from whoever wears it."

"Is so," confirmed a forlorn bn Bem. "Removal and exchange must be voluntary."

"I realize that, Commander," Spock replied. "It is merely an idea I have, not a concrete proposal. Give it a little more time."

XI

Four days later McCoy and his research team had not only cracked the organic code of the Pandronian dissolution drug and successfully reproduced it, but they were now drawing it from the ship's organic fabricator in hundred-liter batches.

Each fresh tank of the drug, after being tested for dissolution toxicity, was beamed down to the surface of Pandro. There, under the disdainfully aloof gaze of eb Riss, Commander bn Bem was overseeing the distribution of the liquid. Tendrazin's government armories were turning out hypodermic darts at a furious rate. After being suitably charged with drug from the *Enterprise*, these thousands upon thousands of loaded syringes were placed in the concealed *fasirs* and other dart-firing weapons that had been placed on both sides of the approach to the city.

Facing the distant *varbox* and much closer forest, a broad cultivated plain and cleared area separated the former from the outer, ancient city wall. On either side of the plain facing the approach path to the city, the Pandronians had labored mightily to create two earthen dikes nearly twenty meters high. These formed a wide *V*-shape leading to the city gates, the point of the *V* actually being somewhere inside the city.

Everyone was preparing for the coming attack on the assumption that no quantity of the drug could cause the creatures to turn back. Naturally, the modest walls of the city would never stop a charge from even the smallest of the Klingons' experiments. But they would serve to channel the oncoming behemoths a little faster into smaller and smaller quarters. They were also excellent sites on which to mount the Pandronian dart-throwers.

When word was passed to the *Enterprise* via the communicator given to bn Bem that the onrushing monstrosities were about to break clear of the forest, Kirk, Spock, and McCoy beamed down to join the city's defenders.

Sensing the nearness of a really substantial quantity of raw protein, the creatures had apparently increased their speed.

Kirk had hoped they would have several more days to produce even more of the dissolution drug, but the increased speed wasn't the real reason for the upsetting of the defenders' timetable.

"We have had scouts out monitoring the approach the past three days, Kirk Captain," bn Bem told them as they walked toward an unknown destination. "It appears the creatures do not sleep. Yet all integrals do sleep."

"I believe I can see how that is managed," Spock essayed. "The beasts are so enormous that while a portion of the integrals comprising each one engages in rest, there are enough remaining which perform similar functions to keep the body going at all times."

They had entered a semimodern Pandronian building near the outskirts of the city and been whisked by elevator to the top.

"Should from here have good view, Kirk Captain," bn Bem assured them as they walked out onto the roof of the structure. The commander's assessment turned out to be accurate.

From a position forty meters above the ground and close to the city wall, Kirk could see all the way to the distant forest. Tendrazin lay spread out behind and on both sides, a modern capital city which had retained the charm of its ancestry. One of the attractive, well-kept relics was the old city wall, which was presently lined with dart-armed Pandronian soldiers who would form the last line of defense against the onslaught of an ecology gone mad. Beyond them, only cultivated fields of stabilized associative plants moved in the slight, warm breeze of morning.

Farther off lay the cleared area that separated Tendrazin from the forest proper. Stretching off to either side were the two low earthen walls which the Pandronians had so painfully erected, working in round-the-clock shifts.

"What if the creatures, dumb as they are, choose to turn?" Kirk wondered at a sudden thought. "Suppose they decide to attack the gunners mounted on the walls instead of continuing on toward the city?"

"If Captain Kor's description of their appetites was accurate, Jim, I don't think that's likely." McCoy seemed confident. "They haven't the brains, I don't think, to guess where the irritation will be coming from, and the few soldiers on the ramparts don't represent a thousandth of the potential meal in Tendrazin. No, they'll keep advancing on the city, all right."

"Has already small-scale evacuation been started," one of the assembled councillors told Kirk. "From far side of Tendrazin. Is younglings and elderly only, as precaution. Always precaution. Should your idea not work and that of the wearer of Tam Paupa," and he indicated eb Riss, who was staring interestedly across the plain, toward the forest, "not work, hope we to still save most of population, even if city destroyed is."

"I hope that's what it remains," Kirk told him, "just a precaution."

"A rider comes!" someone called out. Everyone rushed to the edge of the bordered roof. A single *coryat* was rushing toward the city from the forest fringe, both legs of the tall running animal swallowing up the intervening distance with long, loping strides. A moment later the rider himself, panting for breath but otherwise composed, had joined them on the rooftop.

"Are near to emerging from forest," he gasped. "Have all impossible ones increased their speed as they near the city."

"They detect food in ample amounts," McCoy commented, finding the prospect of anyone here ending up in some Klingon experiment's belly discouraging.

"Is noted," Dav pn Hon told the rider. "Have you and all riders done well." The rider, dismissed, took his leave, pn Hon turned to face Kirk.

"Are all gunners ready. Have been given your instructions to fire on nearest creatures and continue fire as long as are able, Kirk Captain. Should last long, thanks to ample supplies of drug produced by McCoy Doctor."

"Not me," objected an embarrassed McCoy. "I had plenty of help in analyzing the drug, and the ship's organic fabrication engineers did the real work."

"Even now is too late, yet still you to these aliens listen," came a stinging accusal from eb Riss. "For chance last to save Tendrazin, throw outworlders and bn Bem into prison and to me alone listen."

As the point of no return approached, several of the councillors appeared to waver slightly. They looked to pn Hon as their spokesman. He turned to face bn Bem, said quietly, "What you say first will we try, as have promised."

eb Riss snorted and turned away from them all. If he held any concern for his own hide he didn't show it. Or, Kirk mused, he might have been trembling inside, only to be calmed by the soothing actions of the Tam Paupa.

"Here they come," McCoy announced.

Trees were smashed aside, large bushes and ferns crushed to pulp under their weight, as out of the forest barrier came a collection of six to twelve of the most bizarre living creatures anywhere in the galaxy. Hopping, stumbling, rolling, they lumbered forward, differing from one another only in size and shape.

All were undisciplined assemblages of the most impossible arrangements of teeth, nostrils, eyes, legs, and other body parts. Kirk had to correct his initial appraisal: They differed from one another in one more respect, besides size and shape.

There was the question of which was most hideous.

The largest of them was hunched forward slightly to right of center. It was so enormous Kirk couldn't see it all, at least not well enough to estimate its true dimensions. One of the councillors, in spite of having been told what to expect, cried aloud. Another found the sight so repulsive he covered his eyes and turned away.

bn Bem was peering into a pair of Pandronian magnifiers. Moving them from left to right, he was surveying the *fasir* positions.

"Our gunners firing steady now are," he informed them. "As yet no change visible on creatures' progress, Kirk Captain."

"Give the drug and the gunners time," McCoy urged. "Its going to take every drop of dissolution drug to have any kind of effect on those leviathans."

Confirming the doctor's words, the monstrosities continued their advance on the city. They were into the cropland now, and the councillor representing Tendrazin and its surrounding lands moaned steadily at the destruction.

Flopping and crawling, somehow moving their stupendous bulks over the ground, they ignored the steady hail of dart-syringes as they progressed. Behind them lay long dark streaks—gouges in the land dug by sheer mass.

At this range the rain of darts formed two clouds of silvery mist on the flanks of the advance. "Still no observable effect," bn Bem reported. Then a hint of excitement entered his voice. "No, wait. On the right is something happening."

Kirk had noted it, too, without the need of magnifiers. So had Spock and McCoy.

It was a little thing, an almost imperceptible shift in one creature's actions—but at least it was a beginning. The monster on the far left, nearest the embankment and guns on that side, had appeared to flinch, its whole hundred-meter-high body arcing to the inside.

Moving inward, it scraped hard against the abomination next to it. Several jaws and grasping limbs on each creature snapped and dug at each other, but the two creatures continued to move forward, though now jammed tight together.

"It's working!" McCoy exclaimed. "The one on the inside was forced inward by the darts, Jim. The drug cost it too much of itself." And he pointed to the affected sections of the creature, which lay like large limp rags in a retreating line back toward the forest.

"It's working," Kirk agreed tightly, "so far."

"There—on the side other!" one of the councillors shouted. Everyone's gaze swerved to the other side of the broad open plain. Sure enough, the beast nearest the irritating weapons there had swung inward, shoving the next creature in to one side, where it pushed up against still another monster.

Sounds of rising fury began to become audible from the approaching armada of integrals, but they continued to come on.

"They're still not fighting, Jim," McCoy complained. "They're jammed almost on top of one another, but they're not fighting among themselves."

"It still has time to work, Bones," Kirk responded. "It has to work."

Pandronian soldiers at the forest end of the dirt ramparts who had now been passed by the marching monstrosities were struggling to move their mobile weapons down the line. As a result, the barrage of darts grew more intense the closer the creatures came to the city. By now they were near enough so that the men and the Pandronians on the rooftop could discern individual features on each animal.

Never in his wildest nightmares as a child had Kirk envisioned anything so ghastly as any one of the oncoming gargantuas. Tendrazin was being assaulted by creatures a dying addict could not have imagined in his most frenzied moments.

Now they were packed so close to one another by the dissolution drug that there was no room left for the creatures inside to move any direction but straight ahead. Any brains contained by the monsters were lost in the task of simply running the huge collection of integrals.

Kirk watched in absolute fascination as the rain of darts continued to strike the outside of the two creatures nearest the narrowing battlements. As each dart injected its tiny portion of drug, a small portion of creature would slough away, to run, hop, scramble back toward the forest, all will to integrate lost. Those on the flanks had lost considerable mass by now, but the remaining majority of creatures in between were only weakly affected.

"Something's got to happen soon," McCoy said nervously. "There's hardly enough room for them to move without stepping on each other."

At first it seemed as if McCoy was wrong, that the abominations would continue their inexorable side-by-side march on the city. But soon a great tintinnabulation arose among the heaving mass of integrated flesh, a cacophony produced by the simultaneous activating of ten thousand mouths.

Coming to a slow, ponderous halt, one creature turned furiously on its neighbor, and it in turn on the next, and it on yet another, so that soon jaws and limbs were engaged in a frightful battle the likes of which no world had ever seen.

"That's done it!" McCoy exulted. "They're attacking one another. They're going to . . . to . . ." His voice faded, crushed by the enormity of what was taking place out on the innocent plain.

"Oh, my God," Kirk murmured.

Indeed, the results of the Klingon experiment had begun to turn on one another—but not in the way Kirk had predicted, and in a fashion none had foreseen.

No more limbs were torn, no flesh ripped from a fellow mountain of integrals, no teeth dug great sores in the body pressing so claustrophobically upon it.

"They're not fighting any more," Kirk whispered in disbelief. "They're integrating with *each other*."

Panic had fallen like a wave on the high council. "Sound full evacuation!" one was yelling repeatedly. "All to retreat! Is lost Tendrazin . . . Is lost Pandro . . .!"

Gunners continued desperately to pour their unceasing hail of darts on the flanks of the attackers, which were attackers no longer. In their place the ultimate horror had been created, forced for survival to close integral ranks instead of fighting among itself. Under the constant prodding of the dissolution drug, the lumbering horrors had blended, joined to form one single, awesome, pulsating mountain of flesh. It towered above the highest structures of central Tendrazin and cast a long, threatening shadow over the plain and city wall behind which Kirk and the others stood.

So enormous was it that it blocked out the sun. Thousands of jaws bellowed and snapped along its front and sides, thousands more eyes of all shapes, sizes, and colors rolled madly in all directions. With a heave that shook the ground, the Pandronian mountain threw itself forward in a half hop, half fall. The action was repeated again, covering more distance this time.

With energy born of desperation the gunners on the enbankments flanking the quivering hulk poured more and

more of the dissolution drug into its clifflike sides. Integrals continued to fall and tumble from the creature's sides, looking like pebbles bouncing down a canyon wall.

"It's not going to work, Jim," a frantic McCoy declared. "We've failed."

"It's my fault, Bones," a disconsolate Kirk replied. "I didn't imagine this possibility."

"Do not blame yourself, Captain." Spock viewed the catastrophe with typical detachment. "Neither did I, though something was bothering me about the concept from the first. Who would dream that the attackers would combine to create one invulnerable beast instead of fighting one another, as would be expected of carnivores in such a situation."

"There's still one last chance, Spock."

The first officer noticed the wild gleam in Kirk's eye. "Captain, I must object. We cannot transmit ship's power. To so weaken the *Enterprise* while it lies in range of a potentially belligerent enemy vessel—"

"I know, Spock, I know!" Kirk's voice was agonized as he fought to make the decision, while the oncoming colossus rolled steadily nearer.

The Pandronians could not wait for Kirk to make up his mind. All had rushed as one to stand before eb Riss, who glared down at them, apparently indifferent to approaching annihilation. They took turns pleading with the wearer of the Tam Paupa to save them, as Pandronians had done for thousands of years in moments of crisis.

eb Riss finally deigned to speak. "Is This One confirmed as premier?"

"Yes—yes!" several voices acknowledged hastily.

"Too easy," eb Riss objected. "It must by the Oath of dn Mida be so sworn."

The members of the high council began to recite in Pandronian a long, involved, unchallengable oath. When concluded, it would irrevocably install the traitor eb Riss as supreme head of the planetary government—no matter what anyone might decide subsequently. Having been sworn in by that oath, eb Riss could not be removed from office.

It looked, Kirk thought, as if the master Pandronian manipulator was about to gain everything he had planned from the very beginning, eb Riss had made use of Kirk and his companions, of the Klingons, and of his own people to achieve absolute power.

And there didn't appear to be any way to stop him.

"Hold your oath a moment. Councillors of Pandro!" Spock's cry was loud and strident enough to startle the councillors to silence.

eb Riss eyed Spock wamingly. "Listen not to this alien outworlder. Finish the oath!"

Spock turned, pointed toward the field. "Closely to look at what happening is, gentlemen," he insisted in halting Pandronian.

In spite of themselves, in spite of the anxiety of the moment, all of the council members gave in to the urge to see what this strange alien was so insistent about

"It—it's stopped," McCoy stammered in amazement.

Similar wondrous mutterings rose from the group of high councillors, for truly, the ontumbling mountain had come to a halt.

"The organism has reached a critical organic mass," Spock explained to the mermerized onlookers. "The demands of an impossible body have overridden the arguments of its nervous systems. Organic demands insist that it can proceed no further without massive ingestions of food. And food it will have."

All gaped as thousands of mouths tore at the flesh nearest to their respective maws, shredding limbs and scales, necks and motile limbs in a frenzy of hunger.

"It's devouring itself," Kirk said for all of them.

"One section no longer can communicate with another," the first officer went on. "Internal communication has collapsed under the all-consuming need for sustenance.

"It has become big enough to go mad."

Steadily one section of the monster vanished into another, all internal direction submerged in the orgy of mindless feeding. Soon the irrigated croplands just outside the old city

wall were awash in a sea of Pandronian animal blood. Claws and fangs continued to rip away at helpless body parts.

The rejuvenated Pandronian gunners had no time to cheer. They were too busy, continuing to pour an unending flood of drug-laden darts into undamaged integrals. Now the individual sections of the creature commenced to fall away in clumps instead of single components. The retreat of disassociated integrals back toward the forest grew from a steady stream into a stampede.

Between its own depredations and the effects of the massive infusion of drug, the ultimate monster dissolved like a steak in an acid bath.

"Will they ever recombine?" Kirk mused.

"I think not, Captain," ventured Spock. "The effects of the dissolution drug are long-lasting. In any event, it was only the Klingon hormones and frequency controller that induced the component integrals to combine into such huge, unnatural associations. That hormone is now being broken down by the dissolution chemicals. Those integrals which are not drugged will likely experience no desire, retain no drive, to form anything other than natural integrations again."

By now the monster had shrunk to half its initial size. Dead sections, paralyzed or wounded integrals began to pile up around its pulsing base like so much living talus. At the rate dissolution was proceeding, the creature would shortly be reduced to manageable proportions. It already appeared to Kirk that the number of wounded or dying integrals exceeded the healthy ones still constituting the living body.

"We give thanks to you for aid," Commander bn Bem told Kirk gratefully, "for having Tendrazin saved from greater evil than could be imagined." Turning, he addressed the silent council members.

"Have done the outworlders of the Federation what they said could be done, what This One said they could do. Have we now another task before us of equal importance." His gaze went past them. "To choose new premier of planet Pandro."

Somehow a shaken eb Riss managed to retain a modicum of composure, although his previous arrogant confidence had vanished. If it weren't for the Tam Paupa he wore, Kirk

suspected, eb Riss would long since have been running for the nearest exit.

"Still This One wears the Tam Paupa," he boomed shakily. "Are among you any who would oldest Pandronian law violate to take it from me?"

Not one of the by-now-angry councillors took a step forward, nor did bn Bem.

"What are we to do, Kirk Captain?" he wondered, bemoaning the seeming standoff. "Cannot anyone take Tam Paupa from wearer without incurring wrath of all Pandronians past. Cannot we confirm nonperson eb Riss as premier, but cannot we have premier without Tam Paupa."

"I still don't see why the situation doesn't warrant an exception to the law," Kirk objected. "For this one time, can't you try and—Spock?" He broke off, staring at his first officer, who was standing utterly motionless, looking into nothingness. "Spock, are you all right?"

McCoy had noticed Spock enter his present state from the beginning, and he cautioned Kirk, "Easy, Jim—Vulcan mind trance."

Already Kirk had noticed the familiarity of Spock's peculiar vacant expression. The Vulcan body swayed ever so slightly, but remained otherwise rigid. Kirk followed the direction of that blank gaze of concentration and discovered it was focused directly on Lud eb Riss.

Gradually that Pandronian's air of determined defiance faded, to be replaced quickly by first a look of uncertainty and then one of alarm. On his head the Tam Paupa seemed to quiver, just a hair.

"No," eb Riss stammered, stepping back away from Spock. "Stop now, Outworlder!"

But Spock's attitude did not change one iota, and the Tam Paupa's quivering increased. Kirk, McCoy, and the other Pandronians were united in their dumbfounded feeling—but for different reasons.

Kirk had no idea what Spock was up to, but he knew better than to try to question or interfere while his friend and second in command was locked in that trance.

The oscillation of the Tam Paupa continued to increase, until a fully panicked eb Riss was forced to put his hands to his head to try to steady it. Both hands came away as if the Pandronian had immersed them in fire.

Something else seemed to go out of the traitor. He stumbled backward blindly, crashed into the restraining wall lining the top of the building, and slumped to a sitting position. He wore the look of a badly beaten boxer.

At that point, when Kirk began to feel he was gaining some understanding of what was going on, something happened which dropped his lower jaw a full centimeter.

Rising on a ring of glistening cilia, the Tam Paupa lifted itself into the air. Microscopically fine filaments withdrew bloodlessly from a circle around eb Riss's scalp. As he stared in disbelief, Kirk could just barely make out a line of tiny eyes, much like those of a spider, running around the front rim of the brilliantly colored circle.

What had given the appearance of metal now revealed itself as organic, having the same sheen as a shiny-scaled Terran lizard. Gemlike bulges in front now declared themselves to be eyes, which stayed glazed over while the Tam Paupa was being worn.

While eb Riss lay like one paralyzed, the Tam Paupa slowly crawled off his head, down his face, and away from his body.

"I'll be an imploded star," Kirk exclaimed, "the blasted thing's alive!"

bn Bem spared a moment to turn a curious look on Kirk. "Of course is alive the Tam Paupa. You mean you knew this not?"

"We thought," murmured McCoy, "it was some kind of crown."

"Is crown truly. Is crown alive," the commander hastened to explain. "Why you think we not make new Tam Paupa when this one first stolen?"

"We thought this one had some particular cultural or spiritual significance," Kirk reasoned.

"Has that," admitted bn Bem, "but is much more why. Tam Paupa is maybe rarest integral on Pandro. One found only every two to five hundred our years. Is why this one missed so badly. Immature Tam Paupa types live plentiful, but useless

to us. Have no ability to integrate with Pandronian mind, to aid in decision-making."

"It's an intelligent creature, then?" a skeptical McCoy wondered.

"Not intelligence as we say," the commander continued. "Is most specialized integral—perhaps most specialized on all planet Pandro." He frowned a Pandronian frown.

"But This One not understand why it left eb Riss. eb Riss not dead."

"What happens when the Pandronian wearing—no, I guess I should say associating—with the Tam Paupa does die?" McCoy inquired. "Surely Pandronians don't live six hundred years or so."

"No. When that happens, council or similar group of potential premiers is assembled. At moment of decision Tam Paupa leaves now useless body of former integration and chooses new one to associate with. That One becomes new ruler of Pandro.

"Is most fair and efficient method of choosing new Pandro leader. Tam Paupa always selects best mind present to associate self with. Is also why Pandro never have any fat premiers," the commander added as an afterthought. "Tam Paupa draws sustenance as uneating integral from its Pandronian host-partner."

"Sort of like a mental tapeworm," McCoy observed fascinatedly.

"But still remains question, why Tam Paupa leave eb Riss traitor? Is That One not dead," and he gestured at the dazed but still very much alive eb Riss.

"I think maybe I can answer that," Kirk said slowly. "When he enters a Vulcan mind trance, Mr. Spock is capable of mental communication to a certain degree. What he's doing to, or with, the Tam Paupa I can't imagine, but he's obviously doing *something*.

"I wonder how long Spock's known that the Tam Paupa was a living creature and not a hunk of metal, Bones."

"No telling, Jim," the doctor replied. "Could have been from the beginning, or he might have discovered it just now. We never discussed it among ourselves, so if he did know, he

probably saw no reason to bring the subject up. Besides, you know Spock when he really gets interested in something."

"I know, Bones. Sometimes he forgets that the rest of us might not see things as clearly as he does," Kirk noted. "And speaking of seeing things clearly . . ." He pointed downward.

After a long pause next to eb Riss's motionless body, the Tam Paupa had apparently concluded its scrutiny of the assembled prospective candidates. It began to move again on its hundreds of tiny cilia—directly toward Spock.

"We've got to wake him up, Jim," McCoy exclaimed, alarmed at the direction events were taking. "He may not be aware of what's happening." Indeed, the *Enterprise*'s first officer was still staring off into space, and not down at the shining circle approaching his feet.

"Bones, I don't know. Maybe—" Kirk moved to intercept the creature, bending and reaching down with a hand.

A strong blue arm grabbed his shoulder, pulled him back. "No, Kirk Captain," bn Bem warned him. "Not to touch the Tam Paupa. Recall that creature which can live six hundred Pandronian years in unstable jungles of Pandro has defenses other than mental. Recall recent actions of traitor eb Riss."

Kirk thought back a moment. When eb Riss had sought to prevent the Tam Paupa from leaving him, he had reached up with his hands—and promptly yanked them away, in evident pain. Now Kirk scrutinized those limp hands and saw that they were burned almost beyond recognition.

"When so wishes, can Tam Paupa secrete extremely caustic substance for protection," bn Bem went on to explain. "Protects self also from disassociation, even while wearer sleeps."

"Then how the devil," McCoy wondered, "did the rebels manage to remove it from old afdel Kaun?"

"That answer's obvious, Bones, if you stop a minute and think."

"Sure—the Klingons have methods of handling anything, like we do, no matter how corrosive. They must have supplied the rebels who committed the actual theft with everything they needed." His attention was directed downward.

"Right now I'm more concerned with what that impressive little symbiote has on its mind," the doctor finished, voicing professional concern.

"We can't stop it, Bones," a tight-voiced Kirk reminded him, "and it would be highly dangerous to try beaming Spock up while he's still in trance state. He must have known what he was chancing when he began this. Let's hope he has some control over what's happening now."

The first officer of the *Enterprise* showed no sign of retreat or awakening, however, as the Tam Paupa continued its deliberate approach. Although Kirk knew it was a benign creature, he couldn't help comparing the scene to a large spider stalking its prey.

Reaching Spock's feet, the front end of the Tam Paupa touched his left boot. Kirk stiffened, started to reach for the hand phaser at his hip—no matter the consequences to Pandro if he vaporized the creature. More important were the consequences to Spock.

But his hand paused when the creature did. It remained there for long minutes, and Kirk wondered if it could detect his implied threat to kill. Abruptly, it backed away, hesitated again, and this time started straight for Commander Ari bn Bem.

With a mixture of excitement and horrid fascination, Kirk and McCoy stared as the creature touched bn Bem's foot, crawled up the back of his right leg, crossed his chest, went up the back of his neck, and settled itself like a bird scrunching down in its nest on the commander's head.

bn Bem's eyes had closed and remained closed when the Tam Paupa first touched him. Now they opened, and a different bn Bem looked out on the world. It was the look of a wiser Pandronian, one more compassionate and understanding, devoid of the omnipresent arrogance of Pandro.

"Is done," he told the councillors in a deep voice. "Has chosen the Tam Paupa." One by one he locked eyes with the assembled high council members. One by one they wordlessly confirmed him as premier. No oaths or formalities were required, not now.

"Have we been without a leader too long," declaimed High Councillor Dav pn Hon. "Commander former Ari bn Bem, are you now legitimate Premier Ari afbn Bem, ruler of planet Pandro. Done this moment by choice of high council and the true Tam Paupa."

"Is good this resolved well," afbn Bem agreed, without a hint of smugness or personal satisfaction in his voice at the Tam Paupa's choice. He turned now, to face the approving gazes of Kirk and McCoy—and of Spock, whose trance had broken the moment the Tam Paupa had settled itself on the commander's head.

"All thanks is to you, Kirk Captain, McCoy Doctor, Spock Commander. Is once again government of Pandro stabilized."

But while Kirk heard every word the commander said, his attention was focused irresistibly on the Pandronian's forehead. Somewhere in a circular line there, he knew, thin silky filaments had been sunk through the skin into afbn Bem's head, probably into the brain itself.

Hard as he peered, he could see no hint of the connection, so fine were the filaments involved. His gaze moved slightly higher, to note that once more the multiple eyes had glazed over. Again they resembled so many jewels set in a motionless crown.

The Tam Paupa, content in its new partner, was at peace. So apparently, was Ari afbn Bem, and so was the government of Pandro.

"To you, Spock Commander," the new premier was saying, "must go highest of all thanks."

"It was the only way," a diffident science officer replied modestly. He was rubbing his temples. The strain of holding the mind trance was always somewhat wearying.

"What way, Spock?" asked McCoy. "How did you do it?"

"Naturally it was clear the Tam Paupa could not be forcibly taken from eb Riss," Spock went on to explain. "Not only would the Tam Paupa resist with its own particular defenses, but the shock of tearing loose the filaments would have killed it, as well as eb Riss. Only with advanced medical technology could it be done. That's what the Klingons obviously employed

in removing it from afdel Kaun, but we had no time to engage in even modest surgery." McCoy nodded in agreement.

"I had gradually grown aware that the Tam Paupa was a living organism complete unto itself, and found myself drawn to study of its extraordinary circular brain."

"Circular brain?" Kirk muttered.

"Yes, Captain. Functions of both spinal cord and brain are combined in one organ which runs the entire circumference of the body.

"Only recently did I feel I might be able to contact that unique mind. We did not actually engage in mental speech or telepathy of any kind. It was more in the nature of exchanging whole concepts all at once.

"I concentrated on communicating one thing to it: that Lud eb Riss was an unsuitable host. The Tam Paupa was uncertain. I tried to show it that while eb Riss's mind might be organically sound, its decisionmaking process was aberrant and diseased. To illustrate this, I used examples of eb Riss's recent behavior in an attempt to convince the Tam Paupa that such a mind was not a healthy associative partner because it could at any moment turn upon itself.

"In other words, I tried to show that by logical standards—and the Tam Paupa is a very logical organism, Captain—eb Riss was insane. In the end, the creature agreed with me and left eb Riss for a more suitable partner." He indicated afbn Bem, who was standing nearby, listening with interest.

"Yet it started for you first, Spock," Kirk pointed out.

Spock looked mildly discomfited for a minute. "I had only conceived of persuading the creature to abandon eb Riss, Captain. I did not consider that once having done this it might settle upon me as the most reasonable new host. Had the creature persisted in its first decision I do not know what might have happened.

"Nor could I break the mental link I had so firmly established between it and myself. Had it completed a full integration with my mind, assuming it could do so with a non-Pandronian life form, I suspect I would have ended up resigning my commission and remaining here for the rest of my natural life as ruler of Pandro."

"Spock!" McCoy looked aghast.

"I had no choice in the matter, Doctor," the first officer insisted, turning to face him. "The Tam Paupa's power is concentrated foremost on its own needs. I could *not* break that mental bridge. For so small a creature its mental strength is quite incredible.

"Fortunately, it decided at the last minute, perhaps partially as a result of reading the reluctance in my mind, that my resistance to the prospect of ruling Pandro was so strong that it eliminated me as a suitable host. A more receptive mind was required, hopefully one which would actually welcome the prospect of ruling the planet. It chose, as we have seen, Commander bn Bem."

"Don't tell me the Tam Paupa has a compulsion to rule, Spock," McCoy commented in disbelief.

"No, Doctor, it is not that at all. But if you wished to maximize your opportunities for a good life, what better person to associate with than the supreme ruler of the dominant race of the world you live on? It is the Tam Paupa's way of optimizing its survival quotient."

"Argue we not with the Tam Paupa's choice," declared the elderly pn Hon. "Is known well to us Premier afbn Bem's integrity and abilities. Still," and he looked puzzled, "are many present with longer experience and, intending no impoliteness, greater administrative talents. Why, then, Ari bn Bem chosen?"

"I can hazard a guess," Spock told him.

Kirk nodded. "Go ahead and hazard, Mr. Spock."

"Remember our experience on Delta Theta Three, Captain. Commander bn Bem was exposed to the influence of the planetary mother-mind. As we subsequently observed, his attitude was altered significantly for the better by that chastising encounter.

"Perceptive a creature as the Tam Paupa is, I have no doubt that it detected this shift in normal Pandronian state of mind, which none of the other councillors present have had the benefit of."

"What about him?" McCoy demanded to know, compelled by professional concern to pay more attention than he desired

to the only suffering member of the group.

"eb Riss?" a councillor said, noting the direction of McCoy's gaze. "We do not believe in killing, though never was it so warranted."

"We will not kill him outright," afbn Bem explained, "but will he be given maximum punishment under Pandronian law. He will a massive dose of the dissolution formula be given, so that his integrals no longer one another will be able to stand. As all such criminals deserve, he will to wander the streets and fields of Pandro be condemned—in pieces, never again to exist as a fully-functioning Pandronian."

McCoy shivered. "I don't think I'd care to spend the rest of my life not knowing where my arms and legs and body were. No, I'd far rather be killed."

"Is not quite same sensation for Pandronian, McCoy Doctor," afbn Bem told him. "But will insure eb Riss harms no one ever again."

Under order from one of the concillors, guards were called and Lud eb Riss was led away to his fate.

"Owe we you all an immeasurable debt, Kirk Captain," the new premier declared when eb Riss had been removed. "Not only This One personally, but all planet Pandro. Is little enough, but can This One assure you that high council will soon approve application for associative member status in United Federation of Planets."

"That ought to make the Klingons happy," chuckled McCoy.

"Depart in harmony and full integration," afbn Bem told them. "To return as soon as are permitted, Kirk Captain. Will then see some changes made in Pandro and Pandronian attitudes, of which I was once worst example."

"I'm sure you'll make a fine premier, Commander," replied a gratified Kirk, "with the Tam Paupa to help you." He activated his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise*."

"*Enterprise*—Scott here—finally."

"Scotty!" exclaimed a surprised but pleased Kirk. "You're all right again."

"Aye, Captain," the chief engineer replied, obviously in high spirits. "The paralysis was temporary, as Nurse Chapel decided

it would be. I'm fully recovered."

"And the other crew members who were affected?" McCoy inquired over his own communicator.

"They're all comin' along fine, Dr. McCoy. Chapel says they should all be up and about in a couple of days."

"All good news, Scotty," responded Kirk, "and just as good down here. You can beam the three of us up. We're finished. Pandro is going to join the Federation and our old friend Commander bn Bem has just been made premier."

"bn Bem?" Scott muttered uncertainly, unaware as he was of the commander's complete transformation. "Captain, are you certain . . .?"

"He's changed quite a bit since he first stepped on board the *Enterprise*, Scotty, and he's the first to admit that it's been for the better. Also, the Klingons have experienced a severe case of diplomatic foot-in-mouth disease."

"That doesn't send me into fits of depression, Captain."

"I didn't think it would, Scotty. Whenever you're ready."

"Aye, Captain. Stand by."

The entire Pandronian high council snapped to attention. Led by their new premier, every member performed an intricate Pandronian salute as Kirk, McCoy, and Spock dissolved in pillars of fire and vanished from the surface of Pandro.

As soon as he was sure transportation was proceeding normally, Scott left the conclusion of the operation to his assistant and rushed toward the alcove. He was moving to shake Kirk's hand almost before final recomposition was completed.

"Good to see you back on your feet, Scotty," was Kirk's first observation as he stepped down from the alcove.

"There don't seem to be any aftereffects, either, Captain," his chief engineer informed him. "I'd be willin' to bet that the Klingon's Pandronian allies were so unstable and unpredictable that they couldn't be trusted with really dangerous weapons."

"I'd come to the same conclusion, Scotty, even allowing for the demolition equipment they brought on board. They're still

in custody?"

"Aye, Captain."

"You can direct Security to bring them here and beam them down to the surface. Use our last coordinates. I think they'll find a suitable reception waiting for them."

"With pleasure," Scott replied. "A more sour and fanatical bunch I've never encountered. It's a good thing Uhura was the one who interviewed them. I dinna think I would have been quite so gentle."

Kirk nodded, turned to his companions. "Mr. Spock, Bones, we'd better be getting up to the bridge."

"If you don't mind, Jim," McCoy murmured, "I'd just as soon check on those injured security people first."

"Of course, Bones. I forgot." McCoy smiled slightly, left quickly for Sick Bay.

Although still on full alert because of the presence of the Klingon cruiser nearby, it was an understandably happy bridge crew that noted Kirk and Spock's reappearance. There were no shouts of joy, no demonstrations. But nothing in the regulations forbade personnel under alert status from smiling, and everyone seemed to straighten slightly.

"Any change in the Klingons' position, Mr. Sulu?"

"None, Captain," the helmsman replied. "They're still just sitting there."

"Our communications are functioning again, Captain," Uhura put in. "Should I try to contact them now?"

Kirk considered, then smiled a little himself. "No, Lieutenant. Never mind. They know we know they're here. They're probably waiting and hoping that *we* don't start anything, or just go away. We'll oblige them. Any sign of transporter activity since they arrived, Mr. Sulu?"

"No, sir."

Kirk appeared satisfied. "Naturally not. They're afraid we'd detect it and want to know what they were up to on a neutral world. They must be frantic with worry, since they haven't been able to raise their secret installation. I don't think they're going to like what they find.

"Mr. Arex, lay in a course for Starbase Sixteen. Much as I'd like to be around when the Klingons discover what's happened on Pandro, I'd prefer to avoid unnecessary hostilities. And the Klingons are going to be feeling particularly hostile."

Navigator and helmsman moved to execute the order. As they were preparing to do so, Kirk noticed that his first officer seemed in an especially thoughtful mood.

"What is it, Spock?" Abruptly he had a thought of his own. "Don't tell me you regret leaving Pandro?"

"It is not that, Captain. Naturally I had no desire to remain and rule the planet. But there was something else the Tam Paupa offered which I cannot get out of my mind." He looked speculatively across at Kirk.

"It insisted in its own way of communicating that it could instruct me how to fully disassociate in the fashion of the Pandronians. The possibility of being able to separate my body into several independent sections was so intriguing that I confess for a brief moment I was sorely tempted."

"I'm glad you didn't accept, Spock," Kirk told him honestly, appalled at the picture his mind conjured up of three Spock sections running haphazardly about the ship. "I like you the way you are. In one piece."

"That was my eventual feeling also, Captain. Besides, while the Tam Paupa was positive it could teach me to disassociate, it was not quite so certain it could show me the way to reintegrate again. The only thing I want following me through the universe is my shadow. Not," he added strongly, "my arms or legs. I'd rather be a whole Vulcan than a parade."

"Amen to that," Kirk concurred. Then his mood turned somber as the viewscreen replaced the receding planet Pandro with a spacious view of stars and nebulae.

"You know, the Klingons with their experimental creatures weren't behaving much differently than children do with building blocks. Their toy just got out of hand at the end." He stared at the vast panorama on the screen, which formed a very tiny portion indeed of one infinitesimally small corner of the universe.

"In a way we're all like Captain Kor and his people—children playing with building blocks that we don't always understand.

We have to be careful and keep the castles we build out of them down to sizes we can manage, or one day they're all liable to come tumbling down on us . . .

THE PRACTICAL JOKER

(Adapted from a script by Chuck Menville)

I

"Since I have evidently failed to make myself clear so far, Nurse Chapel, I will repeat it once more," Spock told her tautly. "Vulcans are *not* subject to dandruff."

Chapel leaned back in the office chair and eyed the first officer of the *Enterprise* compassionately.

"Perhaps there is a different Vulcan term for it, then."

"Such a disease is *not* possible," Spock insisted. He scratched behind one ear. "However, I am compelled to admit that for an impossible affliction, it is proving most distracting."

"What is?" Both turned as McCoy walked in. "Hello, Christine. Hello, Spock. Is something the matter?" His voice was overflowing with innocence.

"Something has been the matter for a number of days, Doctor. Ever since we departed Draymia and before we began the survey of this non-system grouping of type-four asteroids." He glanced back across the desk.

"Nurse Chapel insists I have contracted a disease common only to decadent physiological systems, something she identifies as *dandruff*. I have explained patiently that Vulcans are not subject to such primitive afflictions."

"Yes, it's an affliction common to the inefficient human organism ... and it seems," McCoy added, leaning over to stare pointedly at Spock's scalp, "that you have an advanced case of it. My, my ... no wonder you've seemed so peevish lately."

"I am never peevish, and I tell you," Spock said in exasperation, "I do not have it. It is simply not possible for - you are smiling, Doctor. I don't believe anything I've said can be taken as amusing."

"Been getting your daily vitamin supplements, Spock? I know I was badly neglectful ... you reminded me though. Remember?"

"Yes, I have to admit that you have returned to schedule with admira -" The first officer suddenly paused. If it was possible for a Vulcan to take on a suspicious expression, Spock had just acquired one.

"Vitamins ... Doctor, is it possible that you harbored some irrational resentment against me for the comments I made regarding your efficiency, on our departure from Draymia? Is it possible that you...?"

Spock rose abruptly from the chair. "I do not think," he said coldly, "that an analysis of my supplements will be necessary."

McCoy allowed himself a smile. "Oh, don't be so stiff about it, Spock. Besides, it can only worsen your condition. I'll remove the additive I put into your supplements immediately, and your primitive affliction will vanish in a couple of days. In exchange, we won't hear anything more about my performance as ship's doctor for a while ... will we?"

"Is that a request," Spock asked, still frozen, "or a threat?"

"Let's call it a reasonable adjustment of circumstances, arrived at by mutual consent of two intelligent beings. I could have arranged for something rather more radical than dandruff, you know. Besides, I'd think you'd find the situation interesting, from a scientific point of view. I didn't even know if it would work. Always nice to see theory confirmed. As far as I know, you're the first Vulcan in history to be plagued with -"

"Please, Doctor. I agree. Just correct it, please."

"All right, Spock, relax." The grin again. "It's not fatal." He walked past the desk and punched out commands on the

computer annex there.

"Something you might be interested in - here's the molecular schematic I had to design to produce the proper results. Took a neat little bit of organic doodling, I can tell you. Vulcans have so many antibodies in their blood it's almost impossible to find something to penetrate all those generations of acquired defenses."

"I'm sure, Doctor," Spock said dryly, peering at the diagram of bonded atoms on the screen, "that it taxed your abilities considerably."

"Speaking of taxing our skills," Nurse Chapel wondered aloud, "how much longer are we going to be stuck on this mineralogical survey before we can continue on back to Alco Starbase for a little rest and recreation?"

Glad of a chance to change the subject, Spock explained. "The extent and density of this free cluster has exceeded all previous drone estimates. Despite this, the captain estimates that we are now several days ahead of schedule. He is as anxious as the rest of us to be done with what is really a minor operation and he sorely resented the orders when they came through.

"Orders remain orders, however. We should be finished with the survey any day. A great deal of value has been learned, even if the learning has been monotonous. The cluster appears to offer considerable commercial promise. The asteroid masses are all irregular in shape, probably the remains of an exploded planet which tore loose from its parent system. Nonetheless they have remained tightly packed together. Some are of considerable size and a few are much larger than Ceres in the Sol system. I venture to say that within a few years the activity here will -"

There was a deep rumble and everything shook.

Chapel nearly fell backward out of the chair. Both Spock and McCoy had to grab for the computer console to steady themselves. The tremor died away quickly, leaving them

suddenly tense. McCoy and Chapel exchanged nervous glances.

An alarm began to sound. From time to time short rumbles rose above the wail and irregular vibrations could be felt underfoot. But the first, serious jolt was not repeated.

"You okay, Christine?"

"Fine, but what happened?"

"I don't know." He looked over at Spock. "What do you think? Spock? Where'd he disappear to?"

Spock was already on his way to the Bridge. Only a very few things could produce the shaking and accompanying rumble they had experienced. Most of them were natural. Only one was artificial in origin. Experience told him it was the latter. They were under fire.

He emerged on the Bridge in time to see the main viewscreen overloaded by a blinding white glare. It faded slowly, the imagery reforming as the ship's scanners strove to recover from the intense dose of light.

He acknowledged a perfunctory greeting from Scott, who stood at the Bridge Engineering Station, as he made his way to the library-computer console.

The familiar whooping cry of the red-alert alarm was louder here on the Bridge, in deference to any sufferers in Sick Bay. He knew it was sounding the length and breadth of the battle cruiser.

Another blast rattled the Bridge enough to separate feet from deck momentarily, despite the artificial gravity. Yet another blast in the same place from a slightly more powerful photon bomb, and Spock's feet would leave the deck permanently.

Behind him Kirk's voice resounded - terse, businesslike - in complete control, although the source of the mysterious attack was still unknown.

"Scotty, give us maximum shielding, full power on the deflectors."

"Aye, Captain." Scott carried out the order, then turned his post over to a panting, just-arrived subordinate. The chief's place was back in Engineering Control, and he headed there in haste.

"Photon bombs," Uhura muttered. "But who?"

Kirk ignored the lieutenant's musing. "Mr. Sulu, bring us about to a new heading. One hundred twenty degrees north, up twenty. Initiate evasive pattern one."

"Aye sir," the helmsman responded promptly, working the instruments.

Kirk's businesslike manner now found a moment for open anger. "Mr. Spock, where were you?"

"I have no real excuse, Captain. I was suffering from a prolonged distortion of subcutaneous follicular tissue."

"Yes, I noticed it. But if you don't find out who's attacking us, you're liable to have it cured forever."

"My own opinion exactly, Captain."

The requisite information was already appearing on the sensor screens above his station. To complement the printed readouts, the computer provided him with a three-dimensional schematic of their pursuers, along with classification, type, armament, displacement, number of crew and probable port of origin.

At the moment all the statistics were superfluous. "Romulans, Captain." He studied the main viewscreen, which still showed their last survey target - an enormous, rapidly shrinking hunk of stellar debris the size of a small moon.

"Apparently they were lying in wait for us on the far side of that major asteroid."

"By the Thane of Comorron!" came a furious voice. The burr was unmistakable. Scott had reached Engineering and when he'd overheard Spock's pronouncement, had yelled through the line Kirk had left open. "A cold-blooded ambush! That's goin' a bit far, even furr the Romulans. Let's give the cowards a fight they won't fergit!"

Kirk sympathized with his chief engineer, but kept his tone even as he hit the broadcast return. "Negative, Mr. Scott. I've already received several damage reports. Combined with the fact that we appear to be outnumbered three to one, I think we'd better settle for some well-directed name-calling."

"Discretion is the better part of valor, sir? I've always felt that was a bit of a contradiction in terms."

"Just stand by to give me all the power you can spare from the deflectors, Mr. Scott."

"Aye, sir," Scott said, making no effort to hide the disappointment in his voice. Kirk switched Engineering off. Sometimes Scott's spirit ran away with his better sense.

"Sulu, give me full power on the rear sensors."

"Aye, Captain."

The view in the main screen shifted as more explosions flared around the ship. Now though, under battle conditions, the visual scanners were automatically compensating for the intense radiation.

The three ships were tiny flecks, but Kirk felt he could make out the distinctive outlines, coming straight for them.

"The Romulans continue to pursue, Captain," Spock reported. "And they are increasing their speed. They also appear to be separating further, changing from attack position to an intricate entrapment maneuver."

"Can we outrun them, Mr. Spock?"

Spock hesitated, studying readouts as fast as the battle computer could supply them. "Indeterminate, Captain. With three ships in pursuit, prediction becomes extremely complex."

"Keep working on it." Lips set tight together, Kirk turned his attention back to the viewscreen and muttered under his breath. "They must want us badly to continue to pursue after their initial attack failed. Too late now for them to plead accident." His expression twisted into a faint grin. "The Romulans are coming." His voice rose as he called to Spock.

"Uncertainty's a hereditary factor with them. I think somebody got nervous and jumped the gun on us. If they'd waited till we were just a few kilometers closer to that big rock, we wouldn't have had a chance."

"True, Captain," Spock conceded. "They must have been observing our progress through the cluster for some time. Fortunately, our survey pattern varied according to the size and density of the asteroids themselves. They could not be entirely certain when we would alter course, hence someone's mounting fear we might suddenly discover their presence.

"Captain?" Kirk turned to look back at Uhura. "I've received an incoming transmission from the commander of the Romulan force. We have visual, too." She grinned. "He seems anxious to talk to you."

"I'll bet," Kirk replied grimly. "Put him through ... I've got a couple of things to say to him."

The sinister view of the three pursuing cruisers was replaced with a momentary flash of static, and then the sharp portrait of a smug Romulan officer.

Kirk disliked him on sight, even more than he did the usual example of Romulan militarism. He wasted no time on diplomatic niceties.

"Whoever you are, I demand an immediate explanation for this unprovoked attack."

"Unprovoked!" the Romulan echoed with mock anxiety. "My dear Captain Kirk, your ship trespassed into Romulan territory in defiance of our treaty. We had no choice but to defend ourselves and the sovereignty of the Empire."

"I know," Kirk shot back, "our appearance was a complete surprise to you."

"A terrible shock," the Romulan admitted.

"Which is how you happen to know my name."

"We, uh...," the Romulan coughed delicately, "recognized the serial number of your ship, and it is widely known who commands the Federation's famed *Enterprise*."

"I see. Then perhaps you can explain this odd discrepancy?"

The alien commander was put off stride. "Discrepancy?"

"Yes. If your detectors have improved to the point that you can pick out our serial numbers at this distance, how come they failed to tell you that we're nowhere near Romulan territory? We were surveying an unclaimed asteroid cluster lying on the Federation border - well outside the farthest Romulan claim.

"I deny your blatantly artificial charge and plan to file a detailed complaint with the Romulan delegate to the Federation."

The commander was not upset. He even managed a smile, of a sort. "This ignores reality, Captain. You forget that invasion of Imperial territory is punishable by death. You and your crew have already been tried and convicted."

"I told you," Kirk said angrily, "we've committed no violation of Romulan boundaries. We're not subject to your legal farce."

"Details, details," came the unperturbed reply. "Oh, I suppose some blithering clerk might find a flaw in our reasoning ... but you will unfortunately not have an opportunity to file that complaint with him." He became positively charming.

"It is a pity you fail to recognize the inevitability of your situation, Captain. Why not surrender your vessel? We might arrange some kind of accommodation - leniency for some of your common ratings, say."

Kirk's stomach turned over. "Why don't you arrange...?" he began heatedly. But the screen abruptly went dark. Perhaps something in Kirk's tone hinted to the Romulan commander that he wasn't going to agree to terms.

Another strong concussion rocked the Bridge.

"Captain," Spock reported, "the Romulan attack may have been hasty, but their closing formation is well conceived. I can find no evasive pattern that will enable us to escape from more than two ships at a time. Regardless of how we maneuver, there will always be one cruiser within range.

"If we turn to fight it, and fail to dispatch it immediately, we will soon be forced to exchange fire with all three. Our deflectors will be unable to handle such a concentration of firepower. Conversely, if we continue to run, it appears that all three will close on us eventually, producing the same untenable position."

Kirk thought furiously. "I disagree about our ability to handle all three of them in a last-ditch fight, Mr. Spock. But I wouldn't put it past one of the Romulan captains to exchange his ship and crew for clan glory by making a suicide charge at us while the others keep us occupied. Our deflectors could never handle that kind of overload."

Spock nodded. "The importance the Romulans attach to certain archaic forms of self-sacrifice is well known. I agree that from the standpoint of the Romulan High Command, the elimination of the *Enterprise* is of such importance that they wouldn't consider the sacrifice of a single cruiser excessive."

"Which means we've got to try and run - somehow," Kirk decided.

The conversation was interrupted by several strange beeps and whines from the navigation console and helm.

"What is it, Mr. Sulu?"

The helmsman was studying his instrumentation with a peculiar grimace of uncertainty. "Captain, we are approaching an unlisted energy field of considerable extent, and I'm getting some mighty odd readings from the sensor scans."

"Mr. Spock?"

"A moment, Captain." Once more the view of the Romulan cruiser dead astern disappeared as Spock engaged the forward scanners.

Ahead, emblazoned across the starfield, lay an enormous mass of light that looked like a lambent fog bank.

"Partially gaseous," Spock informed them, "but also heavily particulate. The difference is still undeterminable. It appears to be a mass of minute energized particles held together by a force other than gravity - it's far too dense to be, say, a nebular fragment. And Lieutenant Sulu is right - the readings are most peculiar.

"Odd that such a unique phenomenon is not on the charts made by the drone that surveyed the asteroidal cluster. Even a drone should have detected such a concentration of energy this close by."

"As far as I'm concerned it came out of a brass bottle," Kirk said excitedly. "It may be just what we need to shake the Romulans. You know how reluctant they are to have anything to do with anything radically unfamiliar. They're appropriators - not explorers."

Spock's reply held a mild warning tone: "Not always an unwise policy, Captain." He gestured toward the screen. "This field registers very strong, and it contains internal subatomic configurations of a still unidentifiable nature."

"We'll have plenty of time to puzzle them out, Mr. Spock, *after* we've shaken the Romulans. Lieutenant Uhura, general order. Secure for emergency running. Mr. Sulu, take us through."

"Yes, *sir!*" Sulu adjusted the helm, and the *Enterprise* changed course slightly, plunging straight into the outermost edge of the luminescent barrier.

"If I may say so, Captain," Spock commented, keeping his attention focused on the sensors that were now registering their passage through the strange field, "your decision was rather hasty. Influenced, I believe, by emotional considerations."

"You bet it was, Mr. Spock," Kirk admitted without rancor. "I weighed all the facts, considered all the evidence - including your own information concerning our probable inability to escape by running or defending against a concerted three-pronged attack. I admit the thought of being blown to bits prompted me to take a bit of a risk. If that's emotionalism -"

"We are entering the inner region of the field, Captain," the first officer observed, thus putting an end to the debate.

A steady vibration had sprung up underfoot. Kirk felt it first in his feet, then all over as it increased, working its way up his body. Despite the effect, his body wasn't vibrating, of course - merely feeling the effects of the oscillating ride as transmitted through the fabric of the ship.

A fantastic parade of abstract forms and images exploded toward them on the main screen as the *Enterprise* sailed through the sea of energy. Colors so brilliant, hues so intense they seemed to have a solid presence. Deep maroons and light yellows, forest greens, blues, blacks, electric pink - a whole region that passed by instantly and had the texture of blackberry milk, another that resembled rutilated quartz lit from within.

Kirk had little time to appreciate the beauty rushing at him. His concern now was with the destructive effects of all that riotous radiation. The vibrations intensified. His voice was jittery when he spoke, from the vibration, not from internal insecurity.

"What are our chances, Mr. Spock."

The first officer of the *Enterprise* was already attempting the near-impossible task of monitoring the readouts with one eye and gauging the composition of the surrounding field with the other, fighting to keep quarks and ergs on the proper sides of his scientific ledger.

"If the intensity and density - the interrelation is vital - does not increase beyond the subatomic, we should be able to continue safe passage. If it rises, our shields will be hard pressed to ward it off."

Kirk gave a curt nod, reached to activate the intercom. It vibrated like a chair massager under his fingertips.

"Mr. Scott, how are things at your end?"

"From the sound of your voice, Captain, no worse than they are on the Bridge. It's hard to tell whether the shields are workin' at all, at times. Strangest arrangement of energy I've seen in some time, and I'm gettin' readings from the dilithium reaction chambers you wouldn't believe. But ... everythin' appears to be runnin' all right."

"According to Mr. Spock, the field we're passing through is composed of very dense, unusually charged subatomic particles."

"Mad matter. That explains some of the readings I'm gettin', then - but not all of 'em, Captain. I don't mind tellin' you I'll be glad when we're clear of this."

"Glad to hear you're bothered, Scotty. If the readouts trouble *you*, they ought to give the Romulans the collywobbles. Kirk out."

"Scott out." He clicked off the intercom and placed one hand on the smooth arc of wall nearby as he studied the gauges which monitored the heartbeat of the *Enterprise*.

"Hold-together, little darlin' ... hold together..."

The energy field was larger than initial estimates indicated, but by interstellar standards it was still an insignificant stain in

the endless vacuum.

An insignificant stain, Kirk reflected as he studied the thinning panoply of color, that might save all their lives.

"Maintain this heading, Mr. Sulu. Mr. Spock, we have readings taken from both sides of the mass now ... what's its configuration and how does it relate to our present situation?"

"According to the computer calculations, Captain, the field appears to be thick enough so that if the Romulans attempt to go around it, we will easily succeed in outdistancing them."

"I think they just reached that same conclusion, Captain," Sulu reported. "I can still pick out their engines through all that concentrated small stuff, and it looks like they've turned back. At the very least, they've slowed to a crawl on the opposite side. Doesn't look like they're going to chance it."

"Stay on those scanners, Mr. Sulu," Kirk ordered. "They may try coming through slowly."

But when there was no sign of their pursuers seconds or even crucial minutes later, he felt safe in taking the ship off red alert.

"No sign of them, sir," Sulu breathed in relief. "It worked."

"They turned back rather than risk the field's unknown potential," Kirk agreed.

Spock turned philosophical. "The percentages would appear to be in the Romulans favor, Captain. From their standpoint the glory is greater if they destroy us in battle. However, if we perish through natural causes such as the energy field, their ultimate objective is still attained. Logically, there was no reason to risk themselves."

"All the same, Spock," he insisted, "they may remain nearby evaluating the field and eventually they may determine they can make the passage safely. They know we've suffered damage, which that rocky journey might have aggravated. We still may see them." He looked to the helm.

"We'll lay to here for repairs, Mr. Sulu. Inform the necessary sections to hurry their work, especially Engineering."

Uhura was rubbing the section of her anatomy that was most often in contact with the ship. "After that ride, I could use some repairs," she observed feelingly.

"I suppose," Kirk theorized, "that what's needed in such cases is an extremely localized deflector field."

"I would suggest," Spock added dryly, "the problem be proposed to Chief Scott. I am sure he would find the mechanics of the problem most stimulating."

"You'd better keep a close eye on the chief, though, Lieutenant. He's a devil with those calipers."

Uhura eyed them both with distaste. "I suppose you both think you're terribly amusing."

Spock looked querulous. "Amusing, Lieutenant Uhura? I can assure you I was merely trying to..."

The elevator doors dilated. "Reporting for duty, Captain," a high voice said.

"Good timing, Mr. Arex. You take over." Kirk rose from the chair. "I'd like to make a personal survey of the damaged sections and then take that overdue mid-meal."

Damage from the Romulan photon bombs proved erratic, but there was enough destruction to give somber evidence of what could have happened. Fortunately, Romulan discipline had a way of breaking down when a large measure of glory was at stake. If the captains of the three cruisers had been able to present a coordinated attack at the optimum moment, now...

They were lucky it hadn't been a Klingon attack. By now a Klingon commander would have executed the entire Fire-Control section for jumping the gun.

As it was, there was some severe damage in Engineering - though nothing irreparable. Not for the resourceful Scott and his people. Also, concussion from near-misses had battered several storage compartments, and nearly hulled the shuttlecraft hangar. Personal injury was minor, however, and there were no fatalities, since the damage had been wrought in unmanned areas. These were easily sealed off. Repair crews, under the direction of engineers Kaplan and Senif, were making rapid progress in repairing the battered sections.

In the upper Officer's Mess, Kirk had joined Spock, Uhura, McCoy and Sulu for what he had hoped would be a leisurely mid-meal. They might not have a chance to eat for some time if the Romulans decided to try a sudden move through the energy cloud.

Scott joined them soon after they began. The chief engineer had been supervising steadily and only now felt satisfied enough to take a break.

He took a long draught of the contents of the huge mug he carried with him. Irish coffee, Kirk noted. He doubted there was another engineer in the fleet who could program a standard naval galley to produce Irish coffee - or Russian, Jamaican, Turkish, Balaklavan, Austrian and the host of additional caffeinic concoctions Scott could brew on demand. The same brand of ingenuity had kept the *Enterprise* one step ahead of disaster on more occasions than he cared to recall.

"How are repairs coming, Scotty?" Kirk inquired, knowing full well Scott wouldn't be present if any serious difficulties remained. But the chief would feel slighted if he wasn't asked.

"Better than I hoped, when I first saw what the heathen's bombs had done." He took a barbecued rib from his tray and bit deep.

"Another couple of seconds in getting full power to the screens, though - as it is, we'll be good as new in another twenty hours." His expression turned sour. "No thanks to those Romulan vultures."

"The Romulans are not even distantly ornithoid, Mr. Scott. I am surprised that you..." Spock grew aware of the amused silence. "I see," he said thoughtfully, "another terran colloquial expression."

"I was referrin', Mr. Spock, to the Romulans' social habits, not their anatomy. Though I could make some suitable comments regardin' that." There were mutters of agreement from around the table.

They'd been very lucky, Kirk mused. He considered the framework of his official report. This was no case of mistaken identity, and there was no question of a misplaced boundary, despite the claim of the Romulan commander.

The ambush had been planned in advance and nearly brought off. Only the overeagerness of some fire-control officer and the presence of the drifting energy field had saved them.

It was hard to make small talk in such an atmosphere, when what everyone really wanted was an officious Romulan neck to wrap their hands around.

Sensitive to such moodiness, McCoy forced a smile and said jovially, "Well, we're still in business." He lifted his buttermilk. "And so I propose a toast to celebrate our narrow escape - is this the four hundred tenth or eleventh?"

Other drinking goblets were raised. "Cheers ... goganko ... offiah..."

No one had managed a single sip, however, before a startled Sulu let out an exclamation of surprise. He was staring downwards, at the dark stain that now ran across the front of his uniform.

"Hey ... this glass just leaked all over me!"

The emotions running around the table were not of amusement, though. Uhura's yelp of surprise followed soon after.

"How do you like that ... so did mine?"

"And mine," Scott added.

Everyone, in fact, sported identical stains. Confusion and puzzlement reigned. An observation came first from Spock, as usual.

"It appears that we are all victims of a rather bizarre coincidence."

McCoy looked around the table. "Maybe ... maybe..."

"The odds against this happening," Spock went on, "against all our glasses being defective or all of us being this sloppy, are astronomical."

McCoy was brushing at his drenched shirt-front and abruptly looked up. "Astronomical my metatarsals! This is no coincidence. I just remembered - we used to pull tricks like this all the time in medical school." He eyed his cup. "Dribble glasses ... we've been hit with dribble glasses." A slow survey of the table followed.

"Don't look now, but we've got a practical joker among us."

"Don't jump to conclusions, Bones," admonished Kirk. But he also found himself studying the faces of his table companions. All except Spock, of course, who was automatically above suspicion. He could not have imagined a dribble glass, much less considered employing one.

For that matter, it hardly seemed the sort of prank anyone present would pull.

"This isn't a group from which I'd expect this kind of infantile humor. Spock's probably right, Bones ... it's just an incredible coincidence."

"That's right," Sulu agreed. "We all got wet, so who'd be playing the joke?"

"Probably a minor defect in the inorganic, nonmetallic fabricator programming," Scott supplied helpfully. "I'll check it out with the specialists in charge on the next shift."

"Good enough," Kirk said with finality. "Right now, I suggest that everyone finish eating before the food gets as cold as my drink."

To set an example, he picked up a fork full of fried potatoes. But as he moved it toward his mouth, the fork suddenly wilted in the middle as if the metal had turned molten. The large helping fell in a greasy splotch down the front of his tunic. It made an interesting contrast to the stain already left by his drink.

Whether it was the awkward tumbling of solid food or the fact that this time only the captain was affected, one couldn't say; but several giggles sounded around the table. They were rapidly stifled.

McCoy hadn't joined in the chuckling. "Another coincidence, Jim?"

Kirk brushed at his shirt and gazed around the table again, more thoughtfully this time. "I'm beginning to wonder, Bones." He eyed the fork.

Something had bent the metal neatly in half midway down the stem. How, he couldn't tell. It appeared to be a perfectly ordinary fork. Close inspection failed to reveal any hidden hinge or abrasions where it might have been filed.

"I'm beginning to wonder..."

They finished the hexed meal in comparative silence, and without further incident. If there was a practical joker among them, he or she was abashed enough to forgo any further demonstrations.

However, the problem did not fade away. It continued to make itself felt throughout the ship ... and in the most unexpected ways. The first new manifestation occurred following the command shift's return to the Bridge. Spock noticed an instrument lying on his console which hadn't been there when he had left. He utterly failed to recognize it. It was obvious how it was supposed to be utilized, but when he tried, he achieved nothing.

"Curious," he finally muttered, "most curious."

Kirk heard and strolled over from the navigation printout where he had been studying statistical readouts on the energy cloud.

"What is, Spock ... what've you got there?" The first officer held it out to him. It was a small tubular device, rather like a monocular viewer.

"I found this instrument on my console, Captain. There is only this single adjustable ring to serve as any kind of control. But it does nothing ... see?"

Placing the eyepiece against his left eye, he fiddled with the ring. At the same time, Kirk noticed the dark ring encircling his right eye. When he pulled the tube away, a matching black circle had appeared around Spock's other eye - a circle, he noted, exactly the same size and shape as the eyepiece.

"It appears to serve no useful function," Spock added. "My best efforts have failed to produce any noticeable result."

In spite of himself, Kirk laughed. So did Sulu and Uhura when they turned and saw the result.

Spock simply stood there, befuddled, glancing from the comm station, to the helm and back to Kirk. Naturally, his ignorance of the situation made it all the funnier to the onlookers.

"I'm ... sorry, Spock," Kirk finally managed to gasp, getting himself under control. "You see, you..." He couldn't manage to produce a quiet explanation. Instead, he pantomimed circles around his own eyes.

Spock continued to stand there for a moment, considering this nonverbal information carefully. Then he reached up and dabbed at his face with one hand. When he brought his fingers down, the tips of two were covered with black smudge.

His lips didn't twist, but he succeeded in scowling with his eyebrows...

If that had been the last incident, Kirk might still have put it down to someone's idea of humor. But the "incidents," as everyone on board was soon calling them, occurred with increasing frequency. And they became less and less amusing.

Only serious thoughts filled Scott's mind as he strolled down the corridor leading back to Engineering Central. Final repairs on the damage wrought by the Romulans were nearing completion, but a few delicate adjustments still had to be made in certain heavily battered sections.

Intricate repairs required careful thought, which in turn engendered a profound hunger. He paused by one of the galley annexes, just as Arex and M'ress rounded the far corner, walking in the opposite direction.

"Officer Scott," Arex called, "if you're hungry, won't you join us for lunch. We were just on our way to mess." His soulful visage radiated friendliness.

Scott politely declined. "No thanks, Arex. I'm just goin' to grab a bit of a snack before I get back to my work. I kinna afford to let some of my younger techs alone too long with certain machinery." He grinned.

"As it will go," Arex replied amiably. "Any word on who was responsible for the ... dribble glasses, someone called them, and for what happened to First Officer Spock?"

"Not a clue. And I've heard scuttlebutt about a number of other childish pranks having taken place around the ship."

Arex and M'ress exchanged glances. "We haven't hearrd anything, orr seen anything like that," M'ress purred.

"Maybe you're immune ... lucky you."

"I hope so, considerring what happened to Mrr. Spock," M'ress replied feelingly. "*Mm-aorrr* ... how embarrassing!"

"See you later," Arex added, as they continued on down the corridor.

Scott murmured a goodbye, then activated the console. Identifying himself as to name and rank, he absently ordered a grilled Swiss cheese on rye.

"No ... make that pumpernickel," he corrected quickly. The ACKNOWLEDGE light came on promptly. Scott pressed the second button, was rewarded by the sight of a filled plate slipping into place behind the transparent receiver guard.

Reaching in, he removed the sandwich, then turned to leave. As he did so, there was a second muffled thump behind him.

Puzzled, he looked back. A second sandwich had appeared in the opening. He shrugged and withdrew it ... only to see it instantly replaced by yet another ... and that by two, piled atop one another.

Muttering to himself, he set his three on the floor and removed the two new ones. Two more appeared, followed by another three ... the last made with Limburger cheese instead of Swiss.

These were replaced by, in rapidly accelerating order, wedges of fudge cake, linzer torte, falafel, three steaming bowls of chop suey, blacktop sundaes, and a dismembered, smoked turkey.

Blinking and whining like a ratchet wrench with the colic, the machine started to flush a river of food so fast Scott had no time for culinary classification.

"What the blazes ... *hold it a minute!"*

His hands were already covered with cheese, melting ice cream, and sauces of various composition and ethnic origin. The lower half of his uniform was splattered.

"I said *one sandwich!"* he shouted frantically. "One blasted sandwich, ye great glob of gastronomical gadgetry!"

Footsteps sounded in the corridor. Arex and M'ress reappeared, on the run. "Mr. Scott," Arex called, "we heard yelling. Is everything...?" The concerned piping of the Edoan

navigator stopped abruptly. Next to him, M'ress had commenced a smooth, feline laugh. Arex joined her.

"I'm sorry, Officer Scott," he gasped. "Excuse us, but..."

"Go ahead and laugh, go on ... big joke!" Scott muttered in irritation as he warded off a barrage of burritos and kidney pie. "I'll wager you two are responsible for everything that ... hey!"

The console was ejecting food through the input/recycle slot now, doubling its firepower and making it harder for him to grab at the control panel - even though various stabs and punches at said switches had failed to produce any lessening of the comestible bombardment.

"Just a moment, Officer Scott," Arex objected, his laughter dying down. "We're not responsible for this or any of the other reported pranks. How could I program this? I have no idea if half of the ... dishes ... lying about are even edible."

"It could be a random program," Scott countered. "I wonder if the captain will buy your excuse."

He dodged a stream of curried kooftah a Persian gourmet would have been proud of and took another step toward the controls. If he could just unbolt the master panel, he could bypass the circuitry and...

"I'm reportin' the both of ye as soon as I..." He paused as he reached the wall, bent to touch the first of two screw latches near the floor.

As he did so a large cream pie shot with impressive velocity out of the machine and caught him flush in the face, knocking him backward several steps. He recovered his balance and stood there, wiping whipped cream from his eyes and staring blankly at the machine.

"Believe us, Officer Scott," Arex began seriously, "we have nothing to do with...," but the chief engineer ignored him, backing away from the annex as if it had suddenly acquired a malevolent intelligence of its own.

That last pie had been thrown *hard* - and aimed.

He eyed the machine warily.

That was not to be the last of the strange occurrences to plague the ship.

II

The pranks multiplied, accompanied by a corresponding decrease in subtlety. Finally it reached the point where even the ship's repairs were being interfered with. The apogee of absurdity was reached when a glowering Kirk came stomping onto the Bridge to stand, hands on hips, just inside the elevator portal.

Arex turned from the navigation console and Spock from his library computer station while M'ress glanced across from communications. "Okay," Kirk announced in a no-nonsense, anything-but-amused voice, "this whole thing has gone far enough."

There were equal parts frustration and anger in his tone. This sudden fury was unlike the captain. Everyone stared at him, baffled.

"What has ... sir?" Arex finally ventured.

Kirk bestowed a baleful glare on the innocent navigator. "I just picked up my clean uniforms from the service chute, Mr. Arex. When I put one on, I discovered *this*." He turned his back to them.

Lettered across the back of his shirt, in bold yellow, were the words: KIRK IS A JERK.

Below this someone had stenciled a simplistic childlike face with crossed eyes and a silly grin.

Events aboard had progressed to the point where no one was surprised at *any* kind of report. But this blatant assault on Kirk's position produced astonished stares from the Bridge personnel. It had progressed from fiat humor to outright insult.

There was a brief, startled giggle from somewhere. Everyone looked nervously at his neighbor, but the giggle was not repeated. It had been indeterminate as to source or gender - fortunately for the giggler.

Everyone was sure of one thing. *They* hadn't laughed - and each in his own way tried to convey that information wordlessly to Kirk as he examined each one in turn. "When the outburst of hysteria has concluded, I'd like an explanation for this recent burst of puerility."

"That," suggested Spock in a strange tone of voice, "may be more difficult than it seems. I was watching both Lieutenant Arex and Lieutenant M'ress closely. I saw no one laugh. Needless to say," he finished quietly, "it did not come from me."

"*Someone* certainly laughed," Kirk countered, his anger dying as curiosity took over.

Further discussion was interrupted as M'ress suddenly rose from her chair to point past Kirk. "Captain, look behind you."

"Really, M'ress," a thoroughly fed-up Kirk muttered, "you're going to have to be more clever than that."

"It's not a joke, sir," Arex confirmed.

Kirk whirled ... and took a couple of steps backward. A thick clinging fog was billowing inward from the turbolift shaft. It swirled around his legs, hugging the floor.

"*Now* what?"

Spock was preparing an answer. The computer supplied it readily. "The source of the atmospheric aberration appears to be centralized two decks below, Captain."

Fog or not, the lift operated efficiently. When Kirk pressed the emergency-stop switch and the door slid aside, it was to reveal a corridor filled from deck to ceiling with a roiling, eerie mist.

Spock took two steps into the cloud and stopped, pulling a small sensorscan from his hip. He took readings and measurements while Kirk fidgeted nervously behind him.

"Well?"

"Frankly, I had expected something else, Captain," he replied, without going into specifics on what the "something else" might be, "but this appears to be a normal, everyday water-based fog ... except that such occurrences are *not* normal on a starship. Perhaps the humidification monitors are -"

Taking another step forward, he began flailing wildly as his legs started out from under him. He twisted and fought for balance with inhuman control. Kirk moved quickly to grab him - then found himself slipping and sliding as though on bearings. But by using one another for support and finally struggling to the projections on a nearby door, they were able to avoid a serious fall. After regaining their balance, it took a bit longer to catch their breath.

That accomplished, Spock disdained the sensorscan for less detailed but more immediate methods of study. He knelt carefully. Nearness to the source of the trouble brought revelation.

"Amazing," he murmured. "The deck here is covered with ice."

"It was almost covered with us," Kirk rumbled. "What kind of ice, Spock?"

"From all indications, normal water ice, Captain. It does not appear to possess exotic or dangerous properties ... beyond the obvious physical ones, of course."

"Ice," Kirk said, staring down the corridor into the frosty miasma. "I don't know what's happening on this ship, Mr. Spock, but it's got to stop before somebody gets hurt. Whoever's responsible for this is getting carried away with his own inventiveness."

As if on cue, the strange giggle was heard again. Kirk had no need to look around for possible concealed bodies - he and

Spock were alone in the corridor. That annoying giggle was loud and distinct this time. In fact, it was faintly feminine and almost - almost familiar.

Kirk took a step toward what he thought might be the source of the sound. Was someone hiding in that fog after all? Instantly he found himself sliding crazily. Only Spock's firm grip enabled him to recover his balance again.

"That laugh - it sounds very much like the one I thought I heard on the Bridge a few minutes ago. There's something awfully familiar about it." He eyed his first. "What do you make of all this, Spock?"

"Despite the increasing number of incidents, Captain, the evidence seems to point to a single guilty party."

"How do you know it's not sev -" Kirk's eyes widened. "You think you know who it is, don't you?"

"Not who, Captain - what. I believe that our practical joker is the *Enterprise* herself."

"The *Enterprise*...?" Kirk hesitated, mulled the hypothesis over in his head. Then familiarity and fact came together, and everything else fell into place.

"Everything makes sense now. That carefully calculated feminine tone - it's the voice of our main computer!"

"Precisely," Spock agreed.

"I want all hands to stations, all computer techs to work doubleshift. We're going to run a complete cybernetics systems-check from bow to stern and get to the bottom of this." His voice grew threatening.

"Trick glasses and offensive food-processing equipment is one thing. But when some circuit failure starts affecting the ship's programming..."

"I heartily concur, Captain. This must be stopped before these pranks grow any more serious.

"At the moment, though, we have a less lethal if more immediate problem." He used his eyes to indicate the floor behind them. "Getting from here to the lift again in one piece, since the floor is now frozen over behind us."

There is no problem, however, that is ultimately insoluble under assault from the combined abilities of a Federation cruiser captain and his science officer. Crawling carefully on hands and knees, they made their way safely back to the elevator.

***

While Arex and M'ress handled their duties forward and Kirk and Spock pondered the problem posed by the apparent breakdown of the central computer, an off-duty Uhura and Sulu were approaching the main door to the Recreation Room. McCoy joined them a moment later.

Uhura touched the switch beside the door latch. A small transparent indicator lit up in green with the word UNOCCUPIED. They followed a small beep provided for the benefit of color-blind, non-Anglo-reading personnel and guests.

Uhura fairly purred with satisfaction. "Good; nobody home ... at least we can enjoy our free time without worrying about practical jokes."

The heavy door slid aside. McCoy trailed them in. "Exactly what the doctor ordered," he quipped, taking in the restful (if illusory) scene of park grounds and fountains.

"The standard re-creation," Sulu observed. "Now for something a bit more original and relaxing." He activated the control which shut the door behind them, closing them off from the rest of the ship.

A moment later an electronic chime struck three times, and Spock's voice filled the empty corridor as it did every chamber and walkway aboard.

"All hands to your stations - this is a general alert. Repeat, all hands to your stations. Second and third computer shifts, report to briefing, second and third computer shifts, report to briefing. Repeat, all hands to sta -"

But within the sealed environment of the Recreation Room, the order went unheard. Possibly something was wrong with the inside intercom speakers.

Possibly...

Sulu moved to the only visible sign of electronic presence in the big room. This isolated fixture was a small console located to the right of the main door. He proceeded to activate it, clearing the park scene from the room.

They stood in the chamber as it actually was, now - a vast hall with distant, curving walls. Ceilings, walls, deck were a uniform malleable white. It was like standing inside a smooth ivory dome.

"Something soothing and homey," the helmsman murmured with anticipation. "What'll it be?" he asked his companions. "Anyone object to a swim at the beach?"

Sulu turned his attention to the intricate keyboard and display screen mounted above. A detailed, three-dimensional schematic of the room program would appear there as the console operator designed it. The console itself consisted of a standard keyboard, plus numerous other controls for adjusting such things as climate, time of day, special effects - and many more. Sulu keyed the latter - only officers and qualified enlisted personnel were permitted to manipulate such touchy details as temperature and oxygen content.

As he worked the dials and switches and buttons, an image gradually began to form on the screen. Minutes passed. As helmsman, Sulu was especially adept in handling computer controls. The diagram formed rapidly under his skillful touch.

Eventually Sulu paused to study the picture, pressed another switch to add a little peripheral vegetation, and examined the finished program with pleasure. He touched another switch

and the diagram rotated three hundred and sixty degrees, then displayed itself on an angle.

With a little flourish he keyed the initiate switch.

Around them, above them, below them, the room began to change.

Spock would have described it as a routine readjustment of physical conditions within a confined space produced by the recreational computer-annex drawing on the extensive fabrication facilities of the *Enterprise*. Anyone born over a couple of hundred years before would have called it a miracle.

But then, Spock could redefine that in simple, logical terms as well.

This design facility was primitive compared to the master dream computer they'd encountered on another world, (*See "Once upon a Planet," Star Trek Log Three.*) but within its limits it was capable of some very effective transmutations in the interest of alleviating shipboard tedium.

Shimmering, fluorescent forms took on substance and the illusion of solidity. Walls and ceilings vanished - to be replaced by a sandy seashore, complete with lapping wavelets and the distant call of gulls. The recreation annex wasn't up to producing three-dimensional simulacra of the birds themselves. That was too fluid an illusion to maintain. But three-dimensional projections of sea birds were available and they flashed on the distant deep-blue sky.

Sulu paid attention to details - after all, advanced manipulation of such instrumentation was an art form. A starfish hugged the water's edge here, dried kelp encrusted the sloping berm there.

"Nice job, Sulu," McCoy complimented, assessing the finalized creation. "You handle water well, but personally this is kind of hot for me. I'm more in the mood for a nice, quiet stroll in the woods."

"That sounds perfect, Doctor," Uhura admitted, squinting up to where a powerful light source reposed in placid imitation of a sun.

"Why didn't you say so?" Sulu asked agreeably. "Woods it is then ... dark and deep."

A single touch dissolved water, gulls, sand, starfish and kelp. The helmsman began again from scratch.

Botany was a favorite hobby of his. As such, he was able to create an even better simulacrum of McCoy's request than he had of the beach. The forest he conjured up (deciduous, North American, temperate zone) was lush and seemingly endless. Rays of sunlight fell like wax blades through the branches and illumined shifting motes of dust. It was a fulfilled vision, even to the moss on the "north" side of the trees and the appropriate fungal undergrowth.

"Ahhh ... that's more like it," McCoy complemented, savoring the crispness in the air and breathing deeply of the aroma of pine and birch ... artificial through it might be. He made an after-you gesture and followed Uhura and Sulu as they started off down the path between the trees.

Their course would wind around and through the limited confines of the recreation chamber. If they got bored, a few touches on the console - now discreetly concealed by Sulu behind a young maple - would alter the terrain yet again. Meanwhile they enjoyed the cool, faint dampness of their own personal forest and tried to identify Sulu's purposely jumbled, programmed bird calls...

***

M'ress, running through the acknowledgments from key personnel which was standard procedure during a general alert, noticed the failure of three officers to report in. She double-checked before bringing the matter to Kirk's attention.

"Captain," she finally reported, "accorrding to elimination prrocedurre and last eye-witness accounts, officerrs McCoy, Sulu, and Uhurra arre still in the main rrecrreation rroom.

They have failed eitherr to rrespond to orr to acknowledge the call to stations."

"That's not necessarily surprising, Lieutenant," Kirk said easily. "To maintain lengthy illusions the main recreation room can be total-sealed from the rest of the ship. You can probably reach them by patching through to the rec room's own speaker system."

"That's just it, sirr, I've alrready trried that." She sounded worried. "They still fail to rrespond. I can't even tell if the call is going thrrough."

Kirk stiffened in his chair. "Now that is surprising. Try once more."

M'ress turned back to her console, activated the necessary bypasses and overrides. "Drr. McCoy, Lieutenant Uhurra, Lieutenant Sulu ... returrn to the Brridge immediately. This is a generral alarrm, I rrepeat, a generral alarrm. Please acknowledge."

"Again," Kirk ordered tightly. What was going on?

M'ress sighed, raised her voice even though she knew the pick-up would compensate automatically. "Drr. McCoy, Lieutenant Uhurra, Lieutenant Sulu ... rreturrn to the Brrid..."

***

The path through the closely packed, tall trees was bordered with thick patches of ferns. Water dripped from a high place into a bog where a venus flytrap closed over the projection of an ant.

The faintly metallic ping of water falling into a small pond was the only sound in the solitude of the forest. The three strollers entered a glade lined with high ferns and brightly colored mushrooms and toadstools. Bark fungi formed elf ladders in the trees.

"So quiet, so relaxing," Sulu murmured. "Such a change from orders and routine. An excellent selection, Doctor."

"Me for a short snooze," Uhura declared, heading for the shade of a thick maple.

"And best of all, no practical jokes," McCoy exclaimed. "Unless," he added half-jokingly, "one of you is the dearly-sought culprit."

Sulu sat down on the grass and grinned. The grin vanished as an unnatural, distant giggle broke the stillness. Uhura looked up curiously from where she'd just gotten comfortable. McCoy was scanning the sky and surrounding trees.

"I know you're especially good at animal detail, Sulu ... but this doesn't strike me as an Irish enough a landscape to qualify for leprechauns."

"That wasn't anything I programmed," Sulu informed him. He was inspecting the dark underbrush with some concern. The illusion inventory of the rec annex was pretty extensive. If someone wanted to give them a scare by introducing a Taurean scimitar-wolf, now...

"Almost sounded like someone chuckling."

The giggle - if that's what it was - wasn't repeated. McCoy finally shrugged. "Probably just a malfunction in one of the audio-effects tapes. Maybe a rewind blotch mixed in with the forward play ... could be most anything. We're all a bit jumpy from the stories circulating."

Uhura climbed to her feet. The glade no longer seemed quite so inviting. "I think I'll pass on that nap. Besides, I'm not that tired yet."

They crossed the open patch of green, picked up the dirt path on the far side. It disappeared ahead and veered to the left among the trees.

Around that first bend, the path unexpectedly vanished. A large square hole intersected its course. As if coaxed by an argumentative breeze, branches appeared from the undergrowth and arranged themselves with unnatural precision across the gap. Once this latticework was complete,

leaves and pine needles fell from above and masked the intertwined branches.

They continued to drift downward until even so astute an observer as Spock would have been unable to tell that only a smattering of dead leaves and twigs covered the hole in the pathway. A last leaf, an afterthought, slipped into place to conceal a tiny hint of darkness as McCoy, Sulu and Uhura appeared in the distance, admiring the scenery and landscape ahead.

None of them heard the unnatural yet familiar high-pitched giggling that sounded in that part of the forest. It was concealed by something by now expert at concealment.

"That's a hemlock, isn't it, Sulu?" McCoy asked, pointing at a tall, handsome growth. "Beautiful. I liked your beach, but...," he gestured expansively, "I wanted something a bit more closed and cooling. It's almost as if ... *hey!*"

His exclamation was matched by a startled yelp from Sulu and a scream from Uhura. This was followed instantly by some ungentle flopping sounds. A rustle of broken leaves and crushed twigs, and then all was quiet.

Quiet until a blast of all-pervasive giggling suddenly erupted around them. Three pairs of eyes turned nervously upwards.

But still nothing was to be seen. "That laughter again," Sulu murmured. "It wasn't our imagination."

McCoy sounded grim. "I was wrong. That's no tape malfunction. Someone's definitely laughing at us." He scrambled to his feet, wiping dirt and clinging splinters from his uniform.

"So we didn't lose our practical joker by coming here after all. But how the devil can someone hide in a cleared rec room? There aren't any sharp corners or dips to hide behind."

"There's an emergency override on the doorseal," Sulu recalled. "Someone might have entered after we'd established this simulacrum."

"Possible," McCoy agreed. "Everyone all right?"

Uhura was just getting to her feet. She winced slightly as she put pressure on her left ankle, but nodded. Sulu had fallen with the practice of one who reacts to such tumbles instinctively. He was unharmed and unbruised. McCoy had simply been lucky.

"Okay." The doctor glanced upward. "I don't know about you two, but I've had enough. I'm going to get to the bottom of this right now!" His statement provoked a response as unexpected as it was rapid. A barrage of giggles preceded an oddly stilted voice that chuckled, "Get to the *bottom* of this." The kibbitzer's tone was jovial, but it did nothing to improve McCoy's dampened humor. He pointed upward, aiming for a spiritual target in the absence of a physical one.

"All right, whoever you are. We fell for your idiotic little joke. Now get us out of here."

"*Fell* for my joke," the voice echoed, evidently entranced with its own wit. "*Fell* for...," it dissolved in burbling chuckles.

Ordinarily, one if not all of the imprisoned officers would have identified the source of that voice by now. But their memories were temporarily clouded by a combination of anger and disgust. They could still only conceive of a flesh and blood antagonist.

"When we find out who you are," McCoy continued furiously, "you're going to be called on the deck before a board of inquiry ... you can bet on it."

Such threats produced no lapse in the steady flow of laughter. On the contrary, it seemed to increase in proportion to the severity of the threat.

"I'm warning you," Sulu added, "the captain will bust you, whoever you are. This has gone far enough. It's not funny any more ... not that any of these pranks ever were."

More giggles ... their unseen adversary appeared to have an unlimited capacity for laughter.

McCoy looked at his companions. "It seems obvious that whoever we're arguing with is too smitten with his own humor to listen to reason - much less to lend us a hand. We'll have to dig our way out of this."

Turning, McCoy tested the composition of the pit wall. The artificial soil was soft and crumbly. He let his gaze travel to the lip of the depression. The hole they found themselves in - no doubt that thought would amuse their unbalanced prankster if he were to voice it - was not terribly deep. But the four walls were vertical. No human ladder, then, and no climbing straight up.

Experimentally, he dug at the dirt. It came away easily.

"Maybe too easily, Doctor," suggested a worried Uhura. "We don't want any sudden cave-ins."

McCoy looked doubtful. "Oh, I don't think our jokester would let it go that far. Besides," he added sardonically, "if we're killed, how could we be the butt of any more jokes? In any case, I don't intend to sit around waiting for him to decide. Want to give me a hand?"

Working together they tried to cut a sloping path out of the pit, occasionally having to back off quickly when a handful brought the dirt above it sliding down. They rapidly became filthy. No sign of a cave-in appeared. It was a slow, monotonous job, but they'd be out before long. As McCoy had supposed, their unseen tormentor showed no inclination to offer assistance.

***

Spock finally looked up from his console to find an anxious Kirk staring at him, waiting for information. "Sorry, Captain ... nothing. I've tried re-patching around the apparently defective emergency override, and canceling out any present programming, without result."

"Ample evidence exists to show that they are still inside, however. Someone's oxygen is being recycled, and from time

to time power is still being drawn to operate the simulacrum machinery.

"Which leaves us with two possibilities," Kirk finished. "Either they can't respond - for what reason we don't know yet. Or else equipment malfunction is preventing them from even trying to answer." The command chair hummed softly as it swung round.

"M'ress ... any luck yet?"

"Still no rresponse thrrough any channels, Captain."

Kirk pondered. "Let's go to the source on this, Spock. It's the computer that's been giving us trouble. The computer supervises everything that goes on in that rec room. So..."

"I was about to suggest that myself, Captain."

Spock turned, and his fingers began a lithe, precise dance over the ship's instrumentation. The blink of indicator lights and the compliant hums and beeps of responsive equipment followed. The reply was presented both in printed form on Spock's screens, and aurally over the Bridge speakers.

"That is for me to know and for you to find out," it announced.

Spock's eyebrows looked as if they had crawled clear up his forehead, through his hair and down his rear collar. Infantile riddle-replies he'd come to expect occasionally from humans. But that something as precise and coldly logical as the ship's computer might resort to such barbaric foolishness seemed to all but herald the end of reason.

Kirk's reaction was nearly as incredulous. "Did I hear that right, Mr. Spock?" he mumbled in astonishment.

"I am afraid," Spock said slowly, "that you did, Captain. The malfunction is clearly more severe than I believed possible." He returned his attention to his keyboard.

"Question," he inquired carefully. "Are you deliberately holding Dr. McCoy, and Lieutenants Uhura and Sulu captive in the main recreation room?"

Another prompt response, this time with a subtle alteration that hinted, perhaps, at something less than complete control over its disturbed circuitry. Certainly, Kirk mused, it wouldn't want to sound like a petulant child.

"I'll never tell," it whined. "Never ever never. Can't make me, either. Can't, can't, *can't!* And I won't."

Hands clenched tightly, Kirk rose and walked over to stand by Spock. "Let me try," he whispered, then directed his voice to the input pickup.

"This is Captain James T. Kirk speaking," he announced with as much steel in his voice he could muster. "You are programmed to obey any direct order I may give."

"That is correct," the voice replied evenly.

Some of Kirk's fury abated at that conciliatory response. Maybe what the computer needed to break it free of this inexplicable insanity was just a little drill-sergeant firmness. Slowly, he continued.

"Very well ... I order you to release officers McCoy, Sulu and Uhura from the recreation chamber immediately."

A series of flashes and winks from the console, followed by a gentle query, "Say 'please?'"

"Well I'll be!" Kirk gulped, by now beyond amazement. Spock leaned back to murmur.

"One should not debate command priority with a machine, Captain. Under the circumstances, I would suggest compliance coupled with a temporary swallowing of pride."

Kirk started to object, then nodded slowly. Keeping his voice level with an effort, he murmured, "Please?"

A quiet pause, and this time the indicator lights seemed to flash in more natural sequence. He was about to exchange a glance of triumph with Spock when the voice jumped in with gleeful clarity, "Say 'pretty please'..."

Kirk snapped off the audio control before any further taunts could be offered. Arex appeared about to say something, thought better of it as Kirk switched the main viewscreen into the intercom system. A terse call and the result was an image of a concerned engineer Scott to go along with his voice.

"Mr. Scott, I've had it up to here."

"Aye, Captain," Scott concurred, ignoring Kirk's angry tone. He could guess its source. Elaboration was sure to follow.

He was right. "We've got some serious trouble with the main computer, Scotty. It's not just custard pies and slippery decks, now. We're pretty sure it's kidnapped Dr. McCoy, Sulu, and Uhura."

"Kidnapped ... the main computer?" Scott's lined face underwent a series of highland contortions as the import of Kirk's words penetrated. "The main computer ... but how...?"

"We're not sure yet."

Scott considered. "Why not ask it to explain itself?"

"We've tried that Scotty." Kirk smiled tightly. "All we've got in reply are taunts and nonsense. Neither Mr. Spock nor myself think continuing along that line is going to produce any useful result - and it doesn't do anything for my blood pressure, either. I can see only one solution, one chance of forestalling even more serious trouble." He sighed.

"I want you to shut down all higher logic functions until we can get some kind of handle on what's responsible for perpetrating this cybernetic imbecility."

"Aye, sir," Scott replied, coming to attention verbally.

"Leave only the purely supportive circuitry operational," Kirk went on. "I want everything capable of abstract reasoning and creative cognition put out of commission until we can get a crew in the central core to dissect those information banks. We can't risk further mismanipulation of on-board functions."

"I'll get a crew right on it, sir. And I'll handle the main lobotomy myself. Scott out."

"Bridge out." Kirk switched off. Scott's image disappeared, leaving the captain confronted with a panorama of alien constellations.

III

Another double handful of soil, yet another ... and then the last. Sulu stepped back and took stock of the steep incline they had cut in the pit wall.

"I think that'll do it, Uhura." He smiled expectantly. "Ready?"

She took a deep breath. "I haven't done any serious climbing in years." In her Academy days, she and several daring friends had ascended the Aeolian Pyre on Tsavo II. If they could see the worry she was expressing now, over mounting ten feet of dirt, they would laugh.

Sulu and McCoy formed a double support with interlocked hands. With this boost, and moving carefully so as not to dislodge any more dirt, she was able to scramble over the rim.

The helmsman followed her a moment later. Then it was their turn to aid a less agile McCoy as he, struggling and cursing, fought his way to the top of the incline.

"When I get my hands on the clown who's behind this," he vowed, panting heavily, "I'll put him in Sick Bay for a month!"

Sulu rocked back on his heels and mopped at his sweaty face. "I thought you were supposed to operate the other way around, Dr. McCoy?"

"This is one time," McCoy countered, "where I think I'd enjoy drumming up some of my own business."

He would have added more, but the forest surrounding them chose that moment to flicker into chaos. Before anyone thought to inquire aloud what was happening, the tall, temperate grove with its gentle breeze and scented air had been replaced by a howling wilderness of ice and snow. Gale winds laden with snow and tiny, stinging ice chips lashed at

them, while above the bone-chilling wind an admonishing voice cried, "Temper, temper! Perhaps this will cool you off!"

Huddled together for warmth, the three officers tried to take stock of their new environment while shielding their faces with cupped hands. Attempting to ignore the driving cold, Sulu made a slow turn. No matter which way he looked there was nothing to be seen but white ground and whiter sky. "We've got a regular blizzard condition here ... how are we ever going to find the exit?"

McCoy was stamping his feet. The surface shrank from the irregular friction ... it was real snow, all right.

Giggles fell like snowflakes around them as the temperature plunged to arctic levels...

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Scott was still trying to imagine how the computer had effected the "kidnapping" of his friends. The abduction puzzled him, the more so since a harried Kirk had not seen fit - or perhaps felt he hadn't the time - to explain the rec room situation.

Future speculation, he decided, would have to wait until he'd carried out the captain's command.

He turned a corner and confronted a sealed single door. He pressed his thumb to the sensor square below the stenciled lettered which spelled, "WARNING - AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY".

At the moment the main computer room was empty. Since this central cortex rarely required servicing and was kept sealed in all but critical situations, it hadn't been visited recently by anyone except the standard security patrol. His practiced gaze showed no hint of unauthorized activity.

This isolation was a pity, since in its fashion the central computer cortex was one of the more impressive sights on the ship. Bank on bank of tireless indicator lights, liquid crystal

displays, glowing poured circuitry - and all this only the tiny, visible part of the ship's heart and brain.

His destination lay at the far end of the room. There he was required to supply his thumbprint again, not to mention having to present both eyes for a retinal identification check. Only then would a hitherto hidden slot present itself for the offer of a special key card. Insertion of the key caused a broad, man-high panel to click and then slide silently aside, revealing a series of sequential switches and controls mounted over a color-coded keyboard.

Human memory activated mechanical as he tapped out a rarely used combination. This caused several sets of the sequential controls mounted above to glow ... the higher logic and creative reasoning telltales. These were subdivided in turn into various sections embossed with such headings as *Intuitive Reasoning*, *Abstraction*, *Deduction*, and *Stage IV Response*. The unlit sections he ignored. "Time for a nap, old girl," he murmured. "Captain's orders." His hand moved for the first of the red-colored switches.

He never reached it.

A piercing whine filled the chamber. It soared into the range of imperceptible ultrasonics before Scott could feel more than a momentary pain. Total disorientation set in as he strove to readjust himself to the fact that he was tumbling toward the ceiling. He landed there with a thud, flat on his back.

Typically, his initial reaction was more emotional than effective. Once he managed to regain his balance and force his mind to accept the fact he wasn't going to plunge to the floor, he rolled over and crawled above the upside-down console set in the far wall.

"Engineering to Bridge," he bawled over the barely reachable intercom. "I've got a problem down here, sir."

Kirk was able to offer commiseration if not help. Exactly the same situation prevailed on the Bridge, where he, Spock, and everyone else had been similarly thrown to the roof.

Spock managed to activate the main intercom by crawling up his library-computer console - or was he crawling down?

"Scotty, what the blazes is going on?"

"I'm not sure, Captain." He tested himself carefully and with self-control only an experienced spacer could muster, walked across the ceiling toward the next bank of interdeck monitors. A quick check was enough to show him that his personal plight was being repeated on every level.

"Our gravity's reversed polarity - all by itself, it seems."

"The latter conclusion is an obvious falsehood," came Spock's clear voice. He was sitting upside-down in his seat, studying the information displayed, on his readouts. "This is an undeniable defensive maneuver by the computer, to prevent Mr. Scott from disconnecting its higher functions."

"Crazy," Kirk muttered, "this is crazy. Not jokes anymore. Our own computer's declared war on us ... and I haven't the slightest idea why."

"I do not believe the term 'war' is yet applicable to this situation, Captain. The computer has not yet shown itself to be openly antagonistic - only misguidedly self-centered." He looked thoughtful, relaxed despite his upside-down position. "I do have, a theory; but first I suggest that if Officer Scott moved away from the computer's logic terminal - far away - it might feel less threatened, and therefore less inclined to take direct action against us."

"Threatened? Mr. Spock, that computer is programmed with so many stabilizing circuits..." His objections were halted by the look on his first officer's face.

"All right," he murmured in resignation, "never argue with reality, I suppose." He directed his voice toward the intercom. "Mr. Scott ... vacate the computer room."

Scott's eyes widened at the order. "Vacate, sir? Now, after this?" His gaze strayed longingly towards the still uncovered terminal.

"On the double, Mr. Scott."

"Aye, sir," he sighed. For a brief moment he considered making a dash for the lobotomizing controls - then he decided against it. Not because of what Kirk might say, but because if threatened again the crazed computer might resort to an even more severe distortion of ecological controls. He couldn't risk exposing anyone but himself to danger more severe than a bad tumble.

Unable to insure that only he would be the object of the machine's retaliation, he turned and walked across the ceiling toward the chamber exit. He paused there for a last look backward. The panel he had opened had not been shut, the telltales still shone brightly. Apparently the computer hadn't managed to find a way to close off its own emergency shutdown. That was his sole encouraging thought. Once he was outside this door, however, those switches would be effectively protected from external manipulation. Kirk's voice sounded behind him.

"Mr. Scott?"

"Just leavin', Captain." He stepped gingerly over the low hurdle formed by the door overhead and turned on the other side, to watch it slide shut behind him.

Stretching downward, he could just reach the door control. As expected, his repeated touch had no effect at all. The door remained closed tight.

Years of experience in ship situations of all types enabled him to cope with what followed.

There was an abrupt cessation of weight, and then he found himself falling. He didn't quite land like a cat, but did succeed in turning his body enough in midair so that his arms and legs - and a less mobile portion of his anatomy - took most of the impact when he hit the floor.

Others were not so fortunate. There were some injuries - sprains, a couple of broken legs, a concussion or two - but nothing fatal.

The chief engineer rolled over and sat up, rubbing at the back of his neck and shaking a fist at the closed door. "Ye bloody big scatterbrain, make up your monumental mind!"

As expected, the door and its now isolated master did not deign to reply.

Experience had also told on the Bridge, where even minor injuries were absent.

"You were right, Spock," Kirk admitted. "Once the threat to its creative reasoning functions ceased, it no longer felt compelled to take defensive action."

The question now uppermost in his mind was, what kind of offensive action might the computer eventually decide to take? But Spock had mentioned a theory. Spock's theories usually turned out to be pretty solid.

"All right, Spock, can you tell me what's happened to my ship?"

Assuming a lecturing pose, Spock began, "Evaluation of the circumstances surrounding both the disappearance of Officers McCoy, Sulu and Uhura coupled with the many previous, though less dramatic, incidents leads me to believe that my first suspicion - that some unbalanced personality on board was tampering with the computer - is false."

"Your reasons, Spock?"

"The machinations which have been carried out so far involve extremely elaborate alterations in the computer's most delicate circuitry and programming. It strikes me that such adjustments and corresponding bypasses of all emergency overrides and fail-safes are beyond the capacity of any group of individuals on board, let alone any one. They would require the facilities and knowledge present only at a major cybernetics construction/repair center.

"With one possible exception," he finished. "Chief Engineer Scott."

"And we know Scotty's not responsible. For one thing, this kind of juvenile delinquency just isn't part of his personality." Kirk looked uncertain. "If it's not due to the actions of someone on board, what then? Central computers are supposed to be fool-proof. Ours ought to shut itself down, considering what it's already done."

"I believe there is only one possible explanation left, Captain. You remember the peculiar energy field we passed through in escaping the Romulans?"

Kirk nodded as he settled back in his chair. It had resumed its familiar location on the floor instead of the ceiling. He considered Spock's words carefully.

"I will assume," the first officer continued, "that the extremely active subatomic particles of which the energy field was composed have acted upon our computer's most sensitive circuits."

"The logic and higher reasoning centers," Kirk supplied.

"Exactly. A kind of electromagnetic infection, to put it crudely. The end result appears to have been an alteration, rather than a breakdown, of the ship's cognitive facilities.

"It is still capable of intuitive reasoning, but now along infantile instead of practical lines."

"So what you're saying," Kirk ventured by way of summing up, "is that the computer, and what it controls on board - meaning just about everything - is now in the 'hands' of a clown-mind." It was an awesome threat - even though, he had to admit, nothing terribly dangerous had happened so far.

Nothing dangerous? Then what was happening to Uhura, Sulu and McCoy?

"What can we do to correct the malfunction?"

"I'm afraid I've no idea, Captain," Spock replied solemnly. "There is nothing predictable about the computer's actions,

other than its unpredictability. Without a pattern, I have nothing on which to formulate a potential solution."

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Sulu hugged his arms to his sides. The gesture was more psychological prop than useful action. It did nothing to alleviate his shivering.

They had managed to stumble over a snow bank. It cut off much of the biting wind, though they all knew that if the fickle mind now in control of the computer chose to alter the gale's angle of approach, it could do so any minute. So they nestled together under the white lee and hoped their tormentor would remain otherwise occupied.

He's starting to turn blue, Uhura mused in wonderment as she stared at the shaking McCoy, her own teeth rattling. Odd ... until now she'd thought that sort of thing only happened on visitape, subtly prepared by professional makeup men. Apparently nature was equally adept at such cosmetics.

Coming as she did from a tropical climate, the temperature drop should have affected her hardest of all. Instead, she seemed to be standing it a little better than her two companions. Sulu was little better off than McCoy.

"The temperature must be twenty below, and still dropping," she observed frigidly.

"Twenty below what?" McCoy grumbled. "Are you on the standard scale or the old Fahrenheit?"

"Well, I'm on the Sulu scale," the helmsman broke in, "and on that scale it's twenty below freezing."

"Look, we're not taking a dispassionate approach to this," suggested Uhura. "No matter how it looks, no matter how radical the illusions set before us, this is still just the Recreation Room. If we travel far enough in one line, we've got to run into one of the walls. From there we ought to be able to feel our way to the door."

McCoy struggled to his feet. He had to shout for his voice to be heard above the steady howl of the wind. "I could punch all kinds of holes in that argument, Uhura, but it's the first suggestion I've heard that contains any sense. Let's move before we all turn into icicles.

"At least walking will help keep us warm. This blizzard shows no sign of letting up."

Also, though he didn't say it, it would keep them from dwelling any longer on the increasingly serious situation they found themselves in.

The doctor found himself in the lead simply by virtue of taking the first step away from their temporary refuge. As they fought their way through the whiteout, he kept those argumentative "holes" he'd casually mentioned to Uhura to himself.

There was no point in giving their invisible assailant any suggestions.

Whoever had commandeered the rec room controls could create any, absolutely any, type of environmental simulacrum. For example, a fake solid wall. Bending it slightly could keep them feeling around in circles for hours, days, all the while thinking they were traveling in a straight line toward a never-nearing exit.

They might counter that by measuring their steps, since they knew the size of the chamber. In that case, they could find themselves confronted with an infinite series of artificial walls and exits.

An exit could be found ... found to lead only to another section of the same snowstorm. McCoy's mind grew dizzy with the possibilities. The computer could let them out into a reproduction of the outside corridor. He could walk to his own cabin ... only to awake still inside the recreation room.

It was enough to drive a man mad.

He forced himself to stray from such ominous thoughts as he struggled awkwardly through the deepening drifts. So far their pernicious prankster didn't seem that far-sighted. Or that clever.

He found himself wondering if the designers of this marvelous method of electronic escape had considered its psychiatric possibilities...

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Kirk studied the readout on the main viewscreen. So far, the deranged computer hadn't interfered with pure information storage and retrieval facilities. Probably, he mused, because it didn't think there was anything in its banks that could be utilized against it.

There were endless tomes on computer repair, on procedures for treating mislaid circuitry, even on treating the colossal machine mind for various psychological electronic traumas. But there didn't seem to be a thing on how to treat a computer whose reasoning power had been inexplicably distorted by the effects of passage through a free-space energy complex of unknown composition. That was hardly surprising, since this was the first time it had happened.

Kirk thought sardonically that they needed to pull the plug and he had no idea where the socket was.

The viewscreen shifted to internal communications channels again, replacing the universe and chromatic emanations of the field with the more prosaic features of a tired young technician. At the moment, he wore fatigue like a badge.

"Search party to Bridge - Ensign Apple reporting."

"Bridge here - the Captain speaking. Report, Ensign."

"Our sensors indicate the missing officers are still in the Recreation Room, sir. The door appears to be jammed from the other side."

A moment's consideration, then, "Hold your position, try the door from time to time, Apple. If it opens, get in there and get them out. Report immediately if there's any change in the corridor."

"Yes, sir."

Some fast switching and the face in the screen grew older, wiser.

"Engineering," Scott acknowledged. "Captain?"

"We've finally located Uhura, Bones, and Sulu. They're in the Recreation..." His voice dissolved in the middle of the word ... to a chuckle!

"Sir ... I didn't get the end of that."

Startled, Kirk coughed and tried again. "We need a full work crew, with power tools, maybe even a laser drill, to open a badly jammed door. Have them report to..."

In horrified fascination, he felt his facial muscles working, twisting involuntarily into a wide grin. "Report to ... to..."

He collapsed in a paroxysm of laughter. Fighting, battling his own body, he gripped the arms of the command chair so hard his knuckles turned white. His head rolled back and forth as he roared at some gut-wrenching cosmic joke.

Arex, M'ress and Spock stared at him in astonishment. But it was Scott who spoke first.

"Captain ... what's the matter, sir? I don't understand what's ... what's...."

The chief engineer of the endangered ship snorted. Then he smirked. The smirk spread to a smile broken by giggles, then chuckles - and finally he, too, was bellowing with laughter.

M'ress was the next to surrender to the assault of merriment. Her throaty, feline giggles were in sharp contrast to the

deeper laughs of Kirk and Scott. She was soon joined by the weird, amused piping of Arex.

Only Spock remained silent, though not unaffected. His concern grew rapidly as he studied his out-of-control companions, while unprovoked, unrestrained hilarity reigned on the Bridge. He was about to voice an observation when both hands suddenly flew to his temples. His brows drew together in an expression of shooting pain. There was nothing he could have done to mitigate the half-anticipated attack of migraine.

Still blubbering uncontrollably, Kirk finally noticed his first officer's silence and painful grimace.

"Come on, Spock," he managed to gasp, "where's that famous Vulcan sense of humor?" This apparent apex of jocularity caused Arex and M'ress to laugh even harder. Meanwhile on the viewscreen, Scott was fighting unsuccessfully to remain in focus.

Holding one hand to the side of his head and gritting his teeth occasionally, Spock turned his attention to his computer console. The crew still retained some control over certain localized monitoring equipment, facilities the central computer apparently disdained to trouble with. Spock already suspected what had happened. Environmental analysis quickly confirmed his suspicions.

"Just as I thought," he murmured painfully.

"What are you," Arex whistled heartily, "mumbling about, Mr. Spock?"

"The atmosphere on the Bridge and presumably also in Engineering," he replied tautly, "is being pumped full of nitrous oxide, better known in the human vernacular as laughing gas. I cannot yet tell what other decks have been affected by this aerobic alteration. In any case, it is no laughing matter." His other hand darted up from the console to press at his opposite temple. "Especially for Vulcans. Breathing nitrous oxide causes ... severe headache."

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The same somber amusement was prevalent in another part of the ship, though with even grimmer overtones.

"This blizzard," Uhura roared under the effect of the gas, "keeps getting worse. And I think the temperature is still dropping."

"I know!" Sulu shouted, in forced hysteria. "If we don't keep moving, we're going to freeze to death."

McCoy fell to the snow. Already his feet and ankles were becoming numb from the unrelenting cold and damp. Nevertheless, he rolled and flailed about as if Sulu's observation were the funniest thing he'd heard in ages.

Such laughter-induced helplessness was worsening on the Bridge. Only one person was not similarly enraptured. Though in considerable pain, he was still capable of coherent thought, of responsive action.

Spock's skull felt as if it were about to fly from his shoulders. He staggered over to the engineering console. By now the pain had reached the point where it occasionally blocked out sight. But he was able to locate and adjust the necessary controls.

There was a sudden loud hum as rarely used circuits were engaged. The controls Spock had adjusted were purely manual and required no switching through any computer annex.

As a refreshing breeze flowed over them, the rest of the Bridge crew began to return to their senses, the laughter dying slowly and agonizingly.

"Thanks, Spock," Kirk was finally able to whisper, as a last chuckle forced its way loose. "How long have we got?"

Spock checked the gauges on the panel, rubbing at his head. The marching on top had ceased. "The emergency air supply should be adequate for another six hours, Captain. When

that's exhausted, we'll automatically go back to standard recycled air until the emergency supply can be cleaned and retanked - assuming that's likely to take place. I would not like to comment on the odds."

"Six hours ... then we've from now till oh-eight-hundred to find a cure for the computer. No telling what we'll be forced to breathe next." His gaze returned to the forward viewscreen.

An extremely serious chief engineer stared back at him. Scott put a hand over his mouth, coughed hard a couple of times. "I heard, Captain ... I'll get right on that crew."

"The main recreation room, Scotty." He nodded as Kirk switched off.

A small measure of sanity returned to the Bridge as Kirk and Spock strove frantically to discover a path through the labyrinth of contradictions their central computer had created. It wasn't long before M'ress indicated a call for Kirk and he was forced to turn his attention from the harried research back to the main viewscreen.

The image that appeared was Scott, but now the background was different. It showed busy men and women working in an otherwise deserted corridor, instead of in Engineering. He knew where the chief engineer was, now.

"How's that door coming, Scotty?"

Scott's voice was filled with despair, discouragement. "None of our power tools work, Captain! The laser drill, standard metal-cutting saws, drills ... nothin'. Near as I can figure, some kind of internal energy drain is operatin' here.

"I tried them on ship's power first. The big drill didn't even turn over. We got a couple of spins from a battery-powered saw before it died. After that, nothin' so much as burped. Whatever's suckin' this stuff dry is as efficient as it is selective."

The view jerked slightly as he moved aside and readjusted the corridor visual pickup. Now Kirk was able to see exactly how

the work was proceeding. Several crew members were attacking the rec room with crowbars while another pounded a steel wedge into the doorway jamb with a sledgehammer.

"As you can see, we're givin' it a mighty go with manual equipment." Scott almost smiled. "We've got some awfully primitive stuff on board, Captain. Whoever wrote out cruiser stores either had a vivid imagination or secret fondness for sweat. Whoever it was, I'm glad he included some old-fashioned persuaders among all the electronics." He chuckled. This time, it didn't hurt.

"Keep at it, Scotty. We've got three people in there whose lives may depend on it." He paused. "I hope the worst that's happened to them is that they've laughed themselves sick."

"We'll have 'em out any minute, sir," Scott assured him, more to boost the Captain's spirits than because it was true. "No need to worry..."

McCoy stopped, exhausted. Sulu and Uhura had long since outdistanced him. Now they turned and waited patiently for him to catch up. Sulu waved.

"Come on, Doctor, we must be close to the outside wall by now."

McCoy shook his head, wondering if the echo of his voice would reach them. "You two better go on without me - cold's finally gotten to my legs. We may not even be walking in a straight line. Illusion ... everything's fake. Maybe ... maybe you can hit the door by chance ... if you move fast. You won't, with me." He sat down in the snow. He could no longer feel anything below his ankles.

"Doctor," Uhura began as she and Sulu walked back to him, "we're not going to..."

She stopped. The enclosed environment changed. The sensation was similar to the feeling of temporal-physical displacement one felt when transporting.

Gone were the snow, the cold, wind and ice. Instead of clinging white drifts they found themselves standing on a patio of pink marble, surrounded by gleaming Corinthian columns out of an ancient Hellenic frieze. The patio was encircled by a lush green lawn, recently watered. Tall, manicured hedges walled them in. The soothing simulacrum was complete even to the position of the warm sun in the sky, the light breeze scented with date blossoms, even drifting butterflies. The maniac in control of the rec room annex was nothing if not thorough.

"Well, what do you know," Sulu murmured, half-appreciatively. "Come on, Doctor, looks like we're finally going to get out of here."

McCoy was too tired to dispute the helmsman, and he sincerely wanted to agree with him. They waited until he hauled himself up on thawing legs and started toward the one opening visible in the surrounding hedge. He passed them, stopped at the entrance. Sulu and Uhura slowed, aware that something was wrong. When he turned back, his voice reflected a weariness born of pessimistic expectation once more born out.

"I don't mean to discourage you, Sulu, but this may not be as simple as you think."

The helmsman eyed him questioningly. Rather than reply, McCoy beckoned them to come ahead. They came up beside him and looked slightly to the left.

The hedge there was far taller than any of them. It opened into two new pathways. A short sally showed that these in turn branched into several more and broke up again into no one knew how many equally confusing mazes.

Sulu looked disconsolate, while Uhura offered an enlightening combination of Swahili, English, and Simbian curses.

"Ever wonder how the rat feels?" McCoy grinned faintly. "I was afraid something like this might happen." He leaned back against the artificial foliage; it gave like real brush.

"Any time it wants to, the rec room computer can be programmed to decoy us with an infinite arrangement of fake walls and exits. Apparently that's not enough for it. It's gone one step further." He gestured at the first division in the green wall.

"We could wander around in this old-fashioned garden maze until we all grew long wrinkles and blank expressions. One thing you can bet on. The last place any of these pathways lead is *out*."

Sulu tried to find a bright side. "At least we know where we are. We might as well stay here."

"Yes, that's right," agreed Uhura hopefully. "We're probably closer to the corridor wall than we were when we started walking."

"Are you sure?" McCoy asked, staring past her. "Take a look behind you."

The two junior officers turned. Marble columns and patio, green lawn, all were gone now. Stretching away in every direction were duplicates of the featureless hedgerows they now faced. Like it or not, they had been trapped in the maze.

"Where do we go from here?" a discouraged Sulu muttered.

The last thing he expected was an answer. So they were all surprised when it came, shattering both the silence and the hedgerow simulacrum with a violent crash.

A section of brush suddenly collapsed inward toward them, and they had a view into the next dimension. The inside of the rectangular section was green; but the other side was made of metal. It was the corridor they had entered from that showed beyond. Their sense of direction must have been right even through the snow and wind.

No wonder their assailant had been forced to alter their environment ... they had been too close to finding their way out.

Standing in the rough-edged opening, through which the perfume of standard composition ship-air now poured, were a worried Commander Scott and several engineering techs armed with crowbars, hammers and picks.

Uhura let out a relieved sigh and slumped against Sulu, who staggered. He suddenly was aware that he was more tired than he had believed possible.

McCoy started forward - and then stopped dead, a peculiar expression twisting his features.

"Scotty," he said strangely, "what's behind you?"

Scott looked understandably puzzled. "Behind me?" He hesitated. Dr. McCoy sounded serious, so he looked right then left. "Service corridor leading off east and west. What in heaven's name...?"

McCoy walked up to him and extended a hand. Scott looked at him, started to say something and then shook it firmly. As he did so a broad smile spread across the doctor's face.

"I know every groove and callus in that palm," he explained with satisfaction. "If you're an illusion, Scotty, you're the best crafted one this rec room ever devised."

"Illusion?" Scott gaped. "By the holy heather, the Captain about worries himself to death over what happened to you three, I nearly break my own back and those of this crew here to get you out, and you have the brass to call me an illusion? McCullhans and Scotts, I'll show you who's an illusion!"

"Easy, Scotty, easy," McCoy gentled. "I plead recreational fatigue."

The chief engineer's brow wrinkled. "Recreational ... what's that?"

"A new disease recently made up especially for the three of us." He gestured at Sulu and Uhura. "We've been overentertained for the last few hours." Then he sat down on the battered-in door and took off his shoes.

Scott watched him in dumbfoundment until the socks started to come off, then his eyes widened. "What happened to your feet?"

"Come on, Scotty, I'm disappointed in you. You should recognize it - surely you've seen enough cases to."

It hit Scott seconds later. "Frostbite ... in the rec room?" He looked incredulous.

"Seems impossible, doesn't it?"

"No ... no, as a matter of fact, it doesn't. You don't have a true picture of what's been goin' on, any of you. You've been out of touch for the last several hours. I forgot that, for a minute. No, nothin' that happened to you in there could surprise me."

"The only thing I'm interested in getting in touch with now," McCoy countered with verve, "is the idiot who's responsible."

"I can help you there," Scott informed them. "We know who the idiot is."

"The culprit's been arrested, then?" McCoy asked. "I'll be interested to see how far over the edge he actually is."

Scott didn't smile. "He hasn't been arrested, and is not likely to be - and you'd have a devil of a time prescribing treatment."

"Tell me about it when I get to the Bridge. First the three of us have to make a little detour to Sick Bay. Sulu and Uhura have assorted bruises and strains that require attention, and I think I have to stick my pods in the cooker for a bit..."

He rubbed ruefully at his damaged feet as he fought to make sense of Scott's words...

IV

"There's no need for either of you to stand this shift," Kirk told Sulu and Uhura when they returned to the Bridge. McCoy came along with them.

Both lieutenants ignored him as they relieved Arex and M'ress. "Sorry, Captain, but you'll have to order us out," Sulu objected.

"And as you can see," Uhura added, "we took the precaution of bringing Dr. McCoy along with us - in case we needed an irrefutable medical opinion."

"Seems I'm outnumbered and outflanked," Kirk mumbled, concealing his pleasure at their safe return. "What is your irrefutable medical opinion, Bones?"

"Both of them are fully fit for duty, Jim. You might even say anxious."

"I see. Then I might as well quit pretending and admit how glad I am to see you both back on the Bridge. We had some anxious moments trying to figure out what our berserk computer was doing to you all."

"Not as anxious as we did," McCoy confirmed. "You know what we went through by now - you did see my preliminary report?"

"I saw what you dictated to the medical records log, if that's what you mean," Kirk replied unenthusiastically. "I'd prefer a less technical description."

"Sure ... if you'll grant me one request."

"Anything within reason and regulations, Bones."

McCoy crossed his arms and rubbed both biceps. "Could you turn up the heat on the Bridge? I know it's my imagination, but I haven't felt really comfortable since we left that madhouse."

Kirk chuckled, then self-consciously cut it off. He had already done more than enough laughing for one day.

"As to your description," McCoy began, only to have Spock interrupt him.

"Captain, we're getting under way ... the main drive has been activated."

"Uhura, on the double, get me Chief Scott."

"Yes, sir." A pause, then a slightly surprised reply. "Sir, Mr. Scott just called in, trying to get in touch with you. He reports that despite the fact every sensor and gauge reads negative action, the warp drive is operating. He has already tried every emergency procedure ... even attempted to shut down the control reactors. Nothing works."

"I heard that the central computer's been responsible for all the trouble," McCoy said. "What's it up to now?"

"Sir, the helm no longer responds," a troubled Sulu reported. "We're coming about to a new heading."

"Very well, Lieutenant," a resigned Kirk said. "As soon as our course stabilizes, give me a full plotting."

There was silence for several minutes as Sulu studied his readouts, then reported, "Course stabilizing, sir ... three-seven-two mark twelve."

Kirk did some quick mental calculation. Roughly translated, those figures meant they were heading back toward the neutral zone, back toward three waiting Romulan cruisers.

"And you can bet they'll be gunning for us, after the way we slipped by them," Kirk said minutes later.

A high, hysterical and by now all-too-familiar chirping echoed through the bridge. It sounded for all the world like a crazed electric cuckoo loose in its clock - and the analogy was not so far wrong.

"Speed increasing, sir," Sulu informed him. "We'll round the energy field any minute - sensors are picking up three vessels." He worked controls. "Long-range scanners show them to be Romulan warships."

"Now *that's* a surprise," Kirk muttered.

"Decelerating, sir," the helmsman continued. Kirk's chair intercom buzzed.

"Bridge, Captain speaking."

"Scott, Captain." The chief engineer sounded concerned. "I've no idea what it means, but I'm receivin' information that the ship's inorganic metallic fabrication facilities have been workin' overtime ever since we started up again."

"Any indication what the computer's up to, Mr. Scott?"

"I kinna tell, sir, that whole deck section's been sealed off."

"Captain..."

"Just a minute, Uhura." He turned back to the mike. "Let me know if you find anything out, Scotty."

"Aye, sir, Engineering out."

"What is it, Uhura?"

"Sir, monitors indicate the main cargo hatch is opening. I'll swing the rear scanners on it."

"Yes ... do so, Lieutenant," he agreed absently. His thoughts were running into each other, threads of one frantic solution meshing with the wrong problem. Slow down, he wanted to shout! Slow down - things were happening too fast. As soon as he thought he was getting one problem under control, something new cropped up to shove it aside.

The rear of the ship appeared on the viewscreen as Uhura manipulated the scanners mounted on the stern. She worked controls and the field of view rotated. Something white and glowing slid past.

"Bring that back, Lieutenant," Kirk ordered hurriedly. Slowly the scanner retraced its path, until it was focused on the rear cargo hatch. Two massive clamshell doors were separating. The spot of brightness was the cargo hold itself, brightly lit from within.

Something was occluding that brightness ... something gigantic.

A huge, highly reflective mass of constantly changing shape billowed from the open hatch. Light from the starship's running lights and the surrounding stars gleamed in that expanding metal skin. It drifted behind the *Enterprise*, still growing rapidly, as the cargo doors closed.

"Keep your scanners on that, Lieutenant - Mr. Sulu, you stay with the Romulans."

Acknowledgment was prompt from both consoles. "What in heaven's name is going on now?" McCoy wondered.

"Your guess is probably better than mine, Bones," Kirk confessed. "You've experienced the computer's whimsy longer than anyone."

"Maybe ... but I never saw anything like that before."

They stared in rapt fascination at the image conveyed by the scanners. It became apparent that the monstrous shape was steadily inflating.

"It looks like some kind of metal balloon, Jim. But what on Earth's it for?"

"If the cargo doors open again and a gigantic pin starts to come out, we'll know," ventured Sulu. "It'd be in keeping with the computer's actions so far."

"I fail to see the connection, Mr. Sulu," a curious Spock observed.

"Sulu's supposition is wrong, anyway, Spock," Kirk told him. "There wouldn't be any noise."

Spock did not appear enlightened. "Noise? Captain, I confess I am puzzled by..." He stopped abruptly, peering hard into his own viewer.

"What is it, Spock?"

"Odd ... the inflatable object is acquiring an outline which superficially resembles a ship."

"I see it now," Sulu agreed excitedly. "It looks like one of the old Federation dreadnoughts - the class that was never built because all that weaponry was never needed."

"Whatever it is, it's about twenty times our size," noted Kirk.

"Captain, we're changing course again," Sulu said. "We're pulling away from it slightly."

"What have the Romulans been doing? We've been within range of their scanners for several minutes now."

"I believe they started toward us several minutes ago, Captain," Spock declared, checking readouts, "but their subsequent movements have been erratic. They have presently terminated all signs of approach. Undoubtedly the sudden appearance of a warship twenty times their size has occasioned some hasty discussion among the Romulan command."

"I'll bet," Kirk agreed, smiling despite his own ignorance of what the computer was up to.

McCoy was less amused. "It may look like a dreadnought now, but if they approach within visual pickup range they'll obtain a detailed fix on it and see that it's nothing more than inflated foil - and they won't think it funny."

"For the present, though, you must admit that the Romulans *have* halted."

"So it's an effective bluff - I see that, Spock. But it won't last long. It'll only infuriate them more." He shrugged. "More cybernetic madness."

"Unless there's a message in it," Kirk whispered thoughtfully.

Spock's brows contracted. "If you would elaborate, Captain."

"Yes, Jim," McCoy wondered, eyeing him steadily, "who's madness are you talking about?" He eyed Kirk in such a way as to indicate that perhaps the central computer wasn't the only brain on board that had gone a little dotty.

"Bones, sometimes to understand madness you have to think like a madman - no, don't be alarmed," Kirk added at the look that suddenly appeared on the good doctor's face. "I mean that this is a time to look for the inner logic.

"All that's happening is that the *Enterprise* is pulling her biggest practical joke so far - only this time it's on the Romulans."

"Are you suggesting," Spock asked, "that the *Enterprise* is capable of experiencing a desire for revenge?"

"What else? She's going to make fools of them by inducing them to attack a balloon, and the Romulans fear disgrace even more than death."

"It is still not possible, Captain. Revenge is a purely emotional action."

"What would you think of a Vulcan who displayed a desire for revenge, Spock?"

"Why, we would try to cure him of his madn - I see, Captain. Your point is well taken. And I confess I have no alternative explanation for the computer's present actions." His gaze returned to the sensor image of the drifting cruisers.

"However, I am most interested just now in the effect of the ploy and not in the motivation behind it..."

***

The alien triumvirate of destruction hovered well outside combat range and considered the colossal apparition that had appeared alongside their target.

On board the heavy cruiser which formed the vanguard of the Romulan task force, an impatient Commander scratched his arm and studied the gargantuan image, trying to imagine how the Federation had concealed a warship of such size from Imperial spies. It didn't seem possible ... yet there it was.

As soon as it had appeared, the *Enterprise* had started off on a new course back toward Federation territory - but slowly, almost challengingly. It was almost as if Kirk were daring him to pursue, trying to lure him into attacking.

He would have to make a decision soon, or their intended prey would make good its escape. To have failed the Plan once was bad enough. To have the quarry return to tweak the Imperial nose and saunter off at cruising speed was infuriating.

One drawback to renewed pursuit, however, was the apparent indifference with which this new vessel squatted in midspace and regarded the Imperial force. It showed no inclination either to attack or retreat. Despite its size, he felt certain his three smaller vessels could outmaneuver it.

Outgunning it was another matter entirely.

"No response to our calls, Commander," his communications officer reported.

"They have refused surrender. Very well. Large it may be, but foolish is its commander. We will not permit so great a prize to escape." He called to his helmsman. "Notify the others - we will attack according to the fourth helical scheme."

"Yes, Commander!"

The order was passed. Weaving in and about several common points designated by their battle computers, the three Romulan cruisers advanced at assault speed. At extreme range they opened fire in a carefully integrated sequence. Photon bombs which had already proven so effective against the *Enterprise* were flung ahead in a complex half-predetermined, half-random pattern that no ship's defenses could avoid.

The object of this triple barrage did not. Several of the powerful explosives struck the anodized skin and blew gaping holes in the false mass. With no outside pressure to collapse it, the bloated construct of micron-thick foil held its shape. Held it firmly enough for the gaping wounds to show that it was completely hollow inside.

As he ingested this unexpected development, the Romulan commander's eyes grew almost as large as the cavernous gaps his expensive explosives had ripped in the thin metal.

"Fooled ... tricked ... insult, insult!" he howled, apoplectic with anger. "Gravest offense ... most heinous perversion of martial chivalry. Contact ... contact the *Enterprise*!" he sputtered at his communications officer.

That worthy hurried to comply. "We have made contact, sir," he reported seconds later.

"Put them through."

The link was cleared - and immediately a high, wavering sound washed over the Romulan bridge. One did not have to be a specialist in Federation emotional utterances to recognize it as laughter.

Of course, the Romulan commander had no knowledge of its true source ... but it was enough for him to know that it came from the *Enterprise*.

All pretense at caution vanished under that teasing giggle.

"Full pursuit speed!" he roared. "I want that ship reduced to dust, to particles, to its component elements."

"Honored Commander," the helmsman protested timidly, "they have some distance on us, and they are no longer within the neutral zone."

Laughter continued to roll across the Romulan Bridge. "Extinguish that! And pursue!"

***

On board another Bridge the same laughter still echoed, though it was beginning to subside. "Captain," Sulu noted, "the Romulans are giving chase."

McCoy let out a long whistle. "They must be a little crazed themselves to follow us this deep into Federation territory, now that they can't surprise us like they did before."

"I don't care about that. I don't even care about the Romulans," Kirk cried. McCoy's expression narrowed. There was an alien, uncharacteristic fearfulness in the captain's voice. "I just want to avoid that energy field.

"Helmsman, do you have a fix on its present position? For nova's sake, stay away from there!"

Everyone had spun to stare in disbelief at Kirk, who sat all but trembling in the command chair, slumped low into the seat.

It looked to Sulu as if the captain were shivering like a man frightened half to death. In fact, this sudden transformation of the indomitable captain into a seeming basket case was so startling everyone was struck speechless.

"I have it plotted, sir," Sulu was finally able to reply ... since some sort of reassurance seemed to be necessary. "Our present course takes us nowhere near it."

The relief in Kirk's shaken countenance was almost palpable. "Thank God," he muttered shakily, "I couldn't face that traverse again."

"Sir, if I may be permitted," Sulu continued, unable to keep the tinge of chastisement clear of his tone, "the damage we

incurred during the actual passage was mini..."

A traitorous feminine voice cut him off. "Why should the thought of making another passage scare you ... there is no reason for it. I sustained only minimal damage in making the actual passage."

"It's not that ... not that," Kirk replied in evident terror. "It's the idea of having your body, every cell and nerve, lanced through and through with radiation we know nothing about ... the thought of what that might do to one's internal make-up..." He actually shuddered. "The thought petrifies me."

"How very interesting," the voice murmured sweetly. The whine of gyros sounded.

"Sir..." Sulu worked uselessly at his instrumentation. "We're changing course again. The energy field lies on the periphery of our long-range sensors, but we seem to be heading straight for it ... again."

"No!" Kirk was shaking so hard he could barely lean forward. "We can't be ... not again."

Laughter reverberated around them ... laughter that was neither human nor sane.

"Reverse direction, Mr. Sulu!"

The helmsman made a futile effort to provoke some response from his console, then looked back and shrugged helplessly. "I can't, sir. Controls are still frozen. Sir, if I may say, we've nothing to worry about so. We know..."

"I can't take that again," Kirk babbled, "I can't take that again..."

The view ahead began to shine as the first effects of the radiant cloud made themselves felt. Barely perceptibly at first, then unmistakably, the deck commenced to oscillate underfoot. Vibration intensified until it was just shy of being severe.

Now the scanners stepped down the overpowering panoply of color to where it was bearable by human eyes.

Kirk remained cowering in the command chair, his hands clutching tightly to the arms. Appropriate discussion would have continued about the captain's startling collapse of nerve, only there was plenty to do at the moment to insure that the *Enterprise* held together during its passage through the field.

There was no *real* reason for concern. After all, they had made this difficult passage once before. Presumably they would do it again. But this time, it would be better to remain intent at one's job, welded to one's instruments - what with the central computer out of control and the captain apparently paralyzed by fear.

Plenty of time for Dr. McCoy to treat the commander once the ship was safely through...

So, while the matter never strayed completely from their minds, everyone remained glued to his post and ignored the quivering figure which shook in the command chair - ignored also the ripples of mirth that steadily issued from the Bridge speakers.

Another set of vibrations commenced not far behind them, as the maddened Romulans - their caution overcome by fury - entered the energy cloud in engine-straining pursuit.

The *Enterprise*'s abrupt course change, which had brought it swooping around within near firing range, was puzzling and unreasonable enough to puncture the Romulan commander's suit of anger. Already deep within Federation territory and with a clear lead, what profit could the *Enterprise*'s commander see in a swing back toward the neutral zone and his pursuers?

It unnerved him more than he cared to admit. One thing the Romulans had learned not to despise in their dealings with the Federation was the fiendish subtlety of high-ranking humans like Kirk.

So he consulted with his officers and with the commanders of his other ships. They dumped their worries into their computers and frantically hunted for a rationale behind the inexplicable maneuver. The cybernetic shrugs that resulted did little to alleviate their concern...

The Romulan helmsman held tightly to one arm of his chair while his other fluttered helplessly over his abruptly unresponsive console. Assured of its new ineffectualness, he turned and caught the eye of his already brooding commander.

"Sir, our sensors are useless while in this field. We've lost all contact with the Federation ship."

That was the final *ubuz* as far as the commander was concerned. "First the *Enterprise* alters a heading on which it had a fair chance of escaping or of contacting help, in order to return within range of a superior force. Then it draws us into this mysterious field. Now it appears they cannot be located." What unknown weaponry, what new insult might Kirk be preparing to unleash on them?

The combination of uncertainties was too much for the already jittery commander. His ship was being subjected to a battering which was strong, but not dangerous, as yet. The operative word was "yet." It offered a chance - maybe the last chance - to withdraw with some shred of honor.

Also, his liver was bothering him.

"We must clear this field before our ships break up. Bring us about on a new heading, navigator, for home."

"You're going to let them get away, sir? After the way they've taunted us, insulted us?"

"If we can no longer locate them," the commander replied dryly, not wishing to fight with his own officers, "that strikes me as a reasonable evaluation of our present circumstances. I suggest attending to your duties, Varpa. These require you to obey orders ... no more. Do so."

Varpa started to say more, suddenly became aware a proximity mine field was an inauspicious place to dance a polka, and shut up.

Pleased by the silence, the commander began to compose his report to Fleet Headquarters: Surreptitious Operations Bureau. As he did so, he regarded the fore viewscreen, which offered a picture of the scintillating, radiant energy field ... now shrinking rapidly behind them.

Hopefully, somewhere within its magnificently colored distortion of space and matter, the thrice-cursed *Enterprise* was already tearing itself to pieces...

The *Enterprise*, however, was holding together very nicely, thank you. So far it had resisted the corrosive efforts of both the radiation and the Romulan invective.

More concern was felt over the coherence, or lack thereof, of its captain. But his terror seemed to fade slightly when an awkward fluttering cracked the steady laughter still issuing from the speakers.

He began to look normal again when the unsteady chuckling started to waver noticeably.

"Tricked," the computer voice abruptly claimed. "Not fair ... not fair..." Laughter and peevish overtone were beginning to fade rapidly now.

"What the ... what's happening to it?" McCoy queried, holding tightly for support to the back of the command chair.

The final giggle sounded ... an unintelligent, choking cough. Then all was quiet.

When Kirk spoke again, it was immediately clear that his *fear* had vanished along with the laughter. "Bones, the worst thing you can do to a practical joker is to play a practical joke on him." His tone was grim but no longer anxious. "Although this is one joke whose successful outcome had something more than a laugh riding on it."

"We're clear of the field, sir," Sulu informed him.

"Good. Change course two degrees up. Same heading. Resume standard cruising speed."

The helmsman looked doubtful, but proceeded to try and comply. His expression and voice brightened the moment he touched the first controls. "All instrumentation is responding normally now, Captain. No indication of any interference with helm functions. Engine response is normal, too."

"And I am receiving standard response in all computer modes," Spock declared. "Higher logic and intuitive reasoning functions check out normal ... with no intimation of a desire to operate on their own." He glanced approvingly across at Kirk.

"That last pass through the energy field apparently reversed the damaging effects of our initial incursion."

"So that's why you were so vocal in your horror of another ride through," McCoy exclaimed as understanding dawned. "And all the time you had us thinking you'd slipped your helm."

"Something radical had to be tried, Bones. Frankly, when it first occurred to me, I didn't think the idea made much sense ... which made it seem perfectly appropriate, in light of the way the computer was acting."

"A well-conceived and efficiently executed deception, Captain," complimented his first officer.

Kirk grinned wanly. "Not entirely deception, Mr. Spock. I was frightened ... not of another passage through the field, but of what the computer might try next. Its sense of humor was becoming increasingly sadistic."

"Amen to that!" McCoy commented fervently.

"What I had to do," Kirk continued, leaning back in the command chair, "was redirect the anxiety I was feeling and let it run away with me."

"You are too modest, Captain," Spock commented. "You had everyone fooled - all of us, besides the computer. I could never have carried off the same masquerade myself."

"Needless to say," needled McCoy.

Spock ignored him.

"The effects of the field on our computer circuitry and operation have been thoroughly documented by independent means," Spock continued, studying his library console. "They will provide much material for dissection by Federation cybernetics experts. I envision many hours of investigative perusal myself."

"Hold it," Uhura suddenly exclaimed. "Captain, I'm picking up Romulan intership and intercom transmissions - evidently something's gone wrong with their broadcast equipment."

Kirk looked puzzled. "More than *wrong*, Lieutenant. Aside from the waste of power, putting intercom transmissions on ship-to-ship frequencies is a serious breach of comm security. I wonder what - Uhura, what are you smiling at?"

"I'll put it on the Bridge speakers, sir." She adjusted controls.

The first voice they heard happened to be that of the task force commander railing at his engineering staff.

"...and turn off those food synthesizers!" he was shouting as the broadcast cleared. "We're knee-deep in hot fudge sundaes, and they're starting to impede passage in the corridors!"

The arguments from all three ships and numerous sections went on in that vein - increasingly confused, increasingly angry, increasingly frustrated.

McCoy grinned broadly. "I didn't even know the Romulans knew what a hot fudge sundae was - much less that their fabricators were capable of synthesizing one."

"I daresay that the entire situation is rather upsetting to them," Kirk chuckled. "It would seem that something's gone wrong with their computers."

"Shall we tell them how they can reverse the effects of the field, Jim?"

"Oh, eventually, I suppose. After all, I don't think I'd want even the Romulans to go through too much of what we've been subjected to. But ... let's not spoil their fun just yet."

The laughter that sounded on the Bridge then was spontaneous - and decidedly non-mechanical in origin. To Spock, however, it was all the same, even if the motivation behind it was less threatening.

"Inexplicable, incomprehensible and irrational," he muttered, turning back to his console. He set about resuming his theoretical studies where he had been forced to leave off when the Romulans had attacked. Laughter filled the air around him.

There was one important difference, though. This non-gaseous stimulation didn't give him a headache.

And while he mused on his research and his companions made jokes about the Romulans' present predicament, he couldn't know that events had been set in motion which would prove of greater importance than anything examination of the records of the central computer's temporary hysteria could produce...

ALBATROSS

(Adapted from a script by Dario Finelli)

I

It had form but faint substance, shape but little color, face but no visage.

Body but no soul.

Its sword was an extension of its own right arm and it moved and danced with a grace and fluidity that was not human.

Sulu parried and thrust, beat and lunged with his own insulated blade. Initially he had been casual in attack, though his tenebrous opponent made up in nimbleness what it lacked in knowledge and experience.

But it was rapidly absorbing every trick Sulu the fencing master could think of - memorizing each one, analyzing its weaknesses and strong points, and then using them on Sulu in return. It had not yet mastered the subtle intricacies of multiple combinations, thus preventing the *Enterprise*'s helmsman from being skewered a dozen times over.

But since Sulu's opponent did not tire, the combat loomed as increasingly unequal.

Sulu relished the contest. Never before had he faced so dangerous a fighter, nor one so eerily beautiful. His luminescent antagonist shone like a billion golden glowmites in the light of the room. Though its skull was featureless, it did not lack eyes.

Those enigmatic orbs kept close watch on the helmsman's movements, on the placement of his feet, on the way he held his balancing back hand, and most especially on the tip of that deadly foil.

Sulu feinted low, then went high with the point of his blade. As his opponent moved his blade up to parry, the helmsman shot his left leg out in a strong side kick.

The gilded wraith knocked the point aside and lunged forward to finish the fight. But instead of skipping back out of range, Sulu stood his ground, shot vertically into the air and executed a perfect jump-spinning back kick. His shoe struck the sword-arm, smashing it aside, while his foil whipped around simultaneously to stab straight through that gleaming, glittering throat...

The attacker froze as Sulu withdrew his blade. No blood had gushed forth on contact, no stream of molten yellow fluid. There had been only an indifferent buzz at the mortal blow.

Walking away from his paralyzed opponent, Sulu picked a towel off a nearby bench and mopped at his sweating face.

"The computer annex's getting too clever, Mr. Scott. It's getting harder and harder to think up new combinations to use against it."

Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott nodded as he pressed the switch on the makeshift control panel. Sulu's dervishlike opponent, a man-shape given form and body by ionized gas held in a rigorously restricted force-field, disappeared - a solid-state djinn.

"I don't see why you've never used that kick-parry before," Scott observed. "It worked marvelously."

Sulu smiled as he toweled the back of his neck. "Never had to get that fancy before. Trouble is, the computer rarely lets me get away with a successful move more than once." He let out a short sigh.

"The problem with that defense is that if you miss the parry-kick, you're left floating in mid-air with your sword at your side - a ripe candidate for shish kebab." His expression turned studious.

"Its movements are still a little unnatural, still a bit machinelike. And I noticed a few other problems, too. There were several times when it fought while floating a couple of centimeters above the floor." He grinned. "No fair. The computer's got enough advantages as it is."

"Not enough to reduce the experience of actual combat, though," Scott countered, checking a tiny window in the panel. "You're still well ahead, laddie, twelve touches to five."

"I remember when I used to beat it seventeen to nothing. It's learning, all right."

Scott shrugged. "That's one of the functions of a games computer. If I could program the ship's computer, you'd have a mechanical fighter who'd act perfectly human, even to experiencing fatigue as the battle wore on. But you know what the captain would say if we asked for ship computation time for a project like this." He indicated the wire-fringed control panel.

"I had a bit of a snap with the stores records cagin' the material for this - filed the requisitions under the 'emergency repairs' column. Shouldn't be any trouble with it unless Starfleet springs a surprise inventory on us. But usin' the main computer -," he shook his head firmly, "we've as much chance of that as me grandmother has of throwin' the caber in the next interstellar Highland games."

Sulu accepted the engineer's declaration as he straightened his blade. The foil was insulated on pommel and blade, leaving only the metal tip uncovered. Whenever that naked point intersected the ionized gas in the force field, it registered as a touch on the control box Scott had rigged. Unfortunately, there was no equally accurate way of judging when his computer-controlled opponent scored a hit on him. For now, that had to be done visually. But the system was new, and Scott was still working on that problem as well as on several others.

They would have plenty of time during this long, dull mission to Draymia to perfect his *katana-to-ashi* opponent. Unlike say,

Mr. Spock, who could always find plenty of challengers for tri-dimensional chess and other logic games, there wasn't anyone else on board who possessed more than a perfunctory knowledge of the modern martial art, which merged European-style fencing with the old karate of the Orient. Those crew members who were athletically inclined preferred bowling, or a good round of water polo.

When he'd finally grown deathly bored with fencing and kicking at his own shadow, Sulu had gone to Scott to see if the circuit-wizard could concoct something in the way of a robotic fighter. It hadn't taken the chief engineer long to produce his golden-gas hominoid.

Scott cocked an eyebrow as he glanced up from reintegrating one of the tiny modular components which controlled the fluidity of the force-field. Sulu was at the open arms cabinet.

"More, Lieutenant? Aren't you worn out yet?"

"Just a little saber work."

The engineer looked disapproving. "The final flurry? You know this thing can't score saber near as well as foil. Half the time I've no idea whether you're hittin' the target or not, with all that blade area. Let alone when it's hittin' you."

"Just a few minutes," Sulu pleaded. "I don't want my edge work to get rusty."

"All right, then, if you must." Scott didn't quite grumble. "I've the little matter of a ship to watch over."

He pressed a switch on the panel. Instantly, still frozen in the pose of its last execution, Sulu's antagonist glowed to life again. Scott adjusted controls, manipulated dials. The games computer set the newly programmed tape in motion and the lambent duelist assumed an *en garde* position.

Sulu lined up across from it. "Ready," he announced, turning his gaze to the gilded ghost. Scott touched a red switch.

The chief engineer had been right, though. At times Sulu himself couldn't tell whether or not he was slipping the first blow in. In a real fight, however, it would be more than merely satisfying to know whether a certain move worked. It would be vital.

The fight lasted only the few minutes Sulu had asked for, but not for the reasons originally given. His nebulous opponent had just performed a good parry, faked high and thrust low. Sulu had fallen for the feint. He jumped, trying to avoid a supposedly high attack. When he saw it was really going low, he attempted to recover by twisting in mid-air to kick-block downward, and got himself confused.

Trying simultaneously to parry with his own sword, the net result turned out to be a neat slash with the metal blade across the thin shoe he was wearing. He came down on both feet, immediately dropped the saber and buckled to the floor, wincing.

Having registered an undeniable score, the computer-controlled figure paused and resumed the ready position, awaiting the command to reengage once more.

Scott flicked it out of existence. There was a brief, dying whine as the force-field's power was cut. Then the engineer hurried over to where the helmsman sat, trying to unsnap the latches on his right shoe.

"Maybe you ought to go back to shadow-fightin', Sulu."

The helmsman grimaced as he worked at the latchings.

"Very funny, Mr. Scott."

Both men saw that the top of the shoe was already stained red. The humor of the situation was relegated to the background.

Scott put one hand on the heel, took a gentle grip on the toe with the other. "Easy, lad ... I'll try and get this off."

While he pushed and pulled, Sulu leaned back on both hands, stared at the ceiling of the gymnasium chamber and tried to think of other things. He couldn't repress a little gasp as the shoe finally slipped free.

There was a three-centimeter long gash across the top of his foot. Though it bled profusely, Sulu still counted himself lucky. The blade had struck at an angle which caused it to miss the big tendons. He made no move to rise.

"Stay there," Scott ordered him. He moved to a nearby cabinet and came back with a first-aid kit. The bandaging was crude, but at least they halted the flow of blood.

"Sorry, Sulu," he apologized when the temporary repair job was finished. "I'm much better with a needlepoint welding laser."

Sulu eyed him archly. "Thanks just the same, Scotty, I'll settle for the bandages."

"Can you walk, or d'you want me to call for a stretcher?"

"No - no stretcher!" Sulu objected quickly. "The captain's liable to hear about it." He struggled to his feet. "Cut's on the top, not the sole. I can make it. Give me a hand to Sick Bay."

Scott mumbled about the waste of time as he helped Sulu get a large sock over the injured foot. Sulu was right, though. The captain wouldn't take kindly to the news that one of his Bridge officers had disabled himself at a game.

The few personnel they encountered in the corridors inquired solicitously as to the cause of the helmsman's limp. It was explained that he had slightly sprained an ankle playing handball. Much to Sulu's relief, this explanation seemed to be accepted by all.

McCoy was in a testier mood than usual. He unwrapped Scott's makeshift bandage job and stared disgustedly at the neat wound, muttering to himself as he went about the business of cleaning it out and closing it up.

"You cut your foot *how?*"

Sulu looked away and repeated the story for the third time.

"I've already told you, Dr. McCoy. Mr. Scott was kind enough to use some of his off-duty hours to develop an artificial warrior for me to practice against. I was making a parry where I shouldn't have been and I cut myself, that's all."

McCoy shook his head as he used three tiny organic clips to clamp the edges of the wound together. Spray from a can coated the wound and clips with an anesthetizing sealant. Eventually, the modified protein clips would be absorbed by Sulu's body, but not until the wound had completely healed over.

"That's a fairly deep cut, Helmsman," McCoy commented as he put away the can. "Try not to kick anyone with that foot till it heals up, hmmm? It should be okay."

Sulu looked as if he had something further to say, but instead glanced at Scott for help. The chief engineer looked indifferent, then abruptly remembered how many times his senior officer had bailed him out of a difficult situation.

"Uh, Dr. McCoy...."

McCoy looked back at him.

"We'd kinna hoped you wouldn't mention this little episode to the captain. I know it has to be entered in the medical log, but the lieutenant would appreciate it if you didn't go out of your way to tell him about it. You know what his reaction'd be."

"More than 'It'll be okay'," the doctor muttered. He didn't look at Sulu as he added, "I haven't got time anyway - not with that ton of medical supplies we're to deliver to Draymia to check out."

Glad for the change of subject and, incidentally, curious, Sulu swung his legs off the table and wondered, "Why should you

have to bother with them at all, Doctor? Aren't they prepacked and self-contained?"

In reply McCoy sat down before a viewscreen and manipulated the controls. Peering over his shoulder, both Scott and Sulu saw vast columns of words and figures, massed tightly together like the ranks of an advancing army. McCoy gestured in an uncomplimentary manner at the screen, shaking his head dolefully.

"The instructional manuals for the equipment and supplies are all mixed up. If I don't get them properly relabeled before we arrive, the Draymians won't be able to tell an encephalograph from an endocrine monitor, or a case of Draymian aspirin from the serum for treating brain damage." He angrily snapped the picture off, turned to them.

"Whoever precoordinated this shipment's a likely candidate for a good shot of the latter drug."

"Can't you get someone to take over your regular assignments until you get everything sorted out?" Scott asked.

McCoy stared back at him evenly. "Would you want me to delegate my duties to someone else? Suppose Sulu had really sliced himself up? Or you, Scotty? How would you feel if I was off cataloging packages someplace?"

Neither man said anything.

He switched the screen back on, swiveled around to stare at the new display. "Besides, the health of hundreds of thousands of intelligent beings might depend on the safe delivery of these supplies. I'm not about to entrust their proper delivery to anyone but myself.

"Now if you don't mind," he growled, "I'd like to get back to my *important* work."

Sulu grinned as he gingerly put more weight on his injured limb. It was amazing how much better it felt already, after McCoy's precise ministrations.

The doctor's surface gruffness deceived neither of them.

"He'll make it all right, if he has to push himself double-shift," Scott declared as the two men entered the corridor outside Sick Bay. "He's got a good two weeks' ship-time before we make orbit around Draymia. It's only stardate fifty-five..."

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"...thirty-two point eight," Kirk finished, his voice slightly hoarse from the dry atmospheres of Draymia. As he spoke into the communicator, it relayed his voice back to the official log recorder on board the *Enterprise*, now orbiting far overhead.

"Preparing to beam back aboard ship following successful delivery of medical equipment and supplies to the planet Draymia in the Draymian star system. Kirk out..."

They stood on a balcony outside the chambers of the Draymian capital city administration, awaiting the arrival of the Supreme Prefect for the final embarkation ceremony. While Spock and McCoy discussed some obscure point of Draymian physiology as it related to certain of the supplies they had brought, Kirk turned and allowed his gaze to roam over the capital's skyline. Once one became used to the size of everything, built to nearly one and a quarter human scale, this world looked almost familiar. This, despite its extreme distance from the nearest Federation outpost planet.

The vegetation here was not terribly alien, likewise the animal life. But the hue of sky was just a touch too green, the tree trunks a bit too orange, the flying creatures' wings too scaly for hominess. In other words, Draymia was one of those many humanoid worlds whose weirdness was all the more disturbing for its elusive familiarity.

It wasn't a world where the local ungulates rolled around on wheels instead of walking on normal legs, or where the vegetation grew upside down like the ostrich forest on Olibaba. No, on a world like Draymia you always had the feeling that if you could just hit the right switch inside your head, there would be a little click, the proper lens would slip

into place in front of your eyes, and everything would suddenly slide over into the normal.

"Hail, Captain Kirk! Hail, Mr. Spock!"

The men turned to see two Draymians emerging from the arched doorway. Kirk recognized the Supreme Prefect, but not his companion.

"Who's the other with him, Mr. Spock?"

"We met him briefly once before, Captain, on arrival," the first officer whispered, wondering idly why there had been no hearty hail for Dr. McCoy. Probably the Draymians simply hadn't noticed him yet. He filed the observation away for future consideration. "The being's name is Demos. He is the chief of the planetary security forces. He was in charge of receiving the few military-related medical supplies."

"Oh, yes," Kirk muttered. "I remember now." He broke off as both aliens halted before them. Their expressions - insofar as Kirk could now judge them - were neutral. Part of the ceremony of departure, no doubt.

Two and a half meters tall, well proportioned, the enormous humanoids could have appeared threatening. Their bulbous pop-eyes, however, gave their faces a comic cast which detracted from their massiveness.

As Kirk watched, the Supreme Prefect flicked one ear forward. The other was turned backward, perhaps to listen to some distant conversation. The effect, alongside the smooth pate, was startling. The Draymians possessed independently mounted ears, like the eyes of an Earthly chameleon.

The Prefect launched straight into the departure ceremony, as the somber-seeming Demos stood at attention at his side. The ceremony itself contained no surprises. Much was said about expanding trade and cooperation between Draymia and the Federation. There were words of mutual praise for the technical accomplishments of both civilizations, assurances of continuing friendship and interdependence, veiled polite references to those misguided races (who shall remain

nameless) who might seek to interpose themselves between the goal of Federation-Draymian brotherhood, and so on.

Kirk and Spock replied where necessary, exchanging diplomatic banter with the aplomb and experience of men accustomed to far more complex goings-on. Kirk recalled one world on which merely saying a simple goodbye involved two days of feasting and athletic competition.

Finally, both the Prefect and Demos performed little half-bows and extended their hands, palms turned upward and open. "We wish to thank," he told them in his gravelly voice, "you and the rest of your Federation for your most welcome and invaluable assistance, Captain Kirk, in this and all matters."

The three men returned the gesture, which signified the taking of final farewell, as Kirk replied, "We hope through our medical assistance programs to develop and strengthen relations with all advanced civilizations such as your own, Supreme Prefect."

With that said, both humans and Draymians returned to a natural stance.

Kirk smiled easily, glanced back at his companions as he pulled out his communicator and flipped it open. "Shall we, Spock, Bones? Kirk to *Enterprise* - beam us aboard, Scotty."

The Prefect extended a hand, palm down this time, fingers bent at the middle knuckles. "If you would be so kind, Captain, a moment..."

Kirk hesitated uncertainly, then looked at Spock and McCoy. Both stared back at him blankly. The gestures were unmistakable, Spock seemed to say. Once the gesture of final leave-taking is made, nothing is supposed to follow.

Something of importance was happening here.

"Belay that, Mr. Scott," he said hurriedly into the open comm. He flipped it shut - for the moment.

"We await," he told the Supreme Prefect.

That appeared to satisfy the huge humanoid. He relaxed visibly and made a gesture to his companion that none of the humans recognized.

"Proceed, Commander Demos."

The security chief, with some ceremony, removed a folded sheet of opaque yellow plastic from a tunic pocket beneath his arm. It opened into the triangle favored by the Draymians.

"I have here a warrant," he announced solemnly, "in your own language, received by deep-space relay for the arrest and trial of one of your crew, Captain." He extended the yellow sheet toward Kirk, who stared at the smooth geometric form in disbelief.

"Best take it, Captain," Spock finally prompted him.

"Warrant," Kirk murmured dazedly. "Who...?"

"If you would be so kind as to read it aloud, please, Captain?" the Prefect requested politely.

Kirk's gaze turned down to the plastic. On it was what looked to be a perfect xerographic copy of the familiar rectangle of official starfleet command-level stationary. The format design and intricate curlicued seals bordering it were either genuine or else the finest counterfeit he'd ever seen.

"You are directed to surrender," he read in a monotone, "for trial by the people of Draymia, Dr. Leonard McCoy, medical officer, U.S.S. *Enterprise* assigned your command..." His voice trailed away.

"Let me see that please, Captain," Spock requested rapidly. Rather more rapidly than was normal for him.

Blank-faced, Kirk handed the document over. His gaze slowly swung around to McCoy.

"Well, Bones...?"

McCoy gaped back at him in open-mouthed confusion and could only shake his head slowly in total bewilderment. He had seen the opaque triangle of plastic, seen the inscribed borders and seals and the signatures at the bottom. But all he could do was stammer to the chief of Draymian security, "This has to be some kind of ... bad joke."

"While there are those among you who might find certain aspects of our sense of humor peculiar," the giant replied stonily, "believe me when I say that we do not consider the wanton slaughter of thousands of innocent civilians a joke."

McCoy's jaws made more movements than were necessary to produce the stumbling response. "Slaughter ... thousands of people...?"

Spock tapped the plastic sheet. "According to this, it is claimed that Dr. McCoy was responsible for a plague which ravaged the Draymian colony on Dramia II some nineteen years ago, Captain."

Kirk shook his head violently, then snatched the warrant from Spock's hands. "Let me see that thing again!" Once more his eyes roved over it, paying particular attention to the concluding seals and signatures. He glanced up at Demos, his voice barely controlled, and cold.

"This is a copy. I'd like to see the genuine article."

Demos executed the Draymian equivalent of a shrug, stepped aside. "Naturally, Captain. I would not expect you do to otherwise. The original is inside, properly protected. This is why we arranged for you to take your leave of us here." He gestured at the building.

"Welcome to the Draymian Chamber of Contemplative Reconstruction, Captain."

"Treachery, you mean," Kirk rumbled, as he stalked off toward the open portal.

Demos' eyes bulged even more than was natural as he followed alongside. "Justice, we mean," he glowered. "Under

the circumstances, Captain Kirk, I think we are showing remarkable restraint."

"Restraint? I'll show you some restraining!" Kirk muttered tightly. "The *Enterprise* can 'restrain' this whole city."

"Doubtless your words hold truth," the Prefect observed from behind him as they entered the building once again. "We are a practical people. I, personally, am well aware of the destructive capabilities of your vessel. We are also an astute people psychologically.

"While you could probably reduce this city to its foundations, Captain Kirk, I've no doubt you will not. You will do nothing. Your reputation has preceded you. We know of your respect for your own laws. And as you have seen, the warrant is perfectly in order and properly approved by your own superiors. You will not disobey their orders."

"Not my superiors," Kirk shot back. "Not in Starfleet. This is a judicial order, issued by administrative authority."

"Whatever the source, Captain," Demos put in, "you recognize its authority. You will not attempt to contravene it. Therefore, I am certain you will offer no resistance while I perform my necessary duty." He reached out and placed a huge hand on McCoy's right shoulder.

"Dr. Leonard McCoy, I place you under official restraint. Do you yield voluntarily?"

McCoy nodded slowly and moved forward when Demos tugged, but the motions were independent of any real thought. He could only turn to gape wordlessly at Spock and Kirk as they followed.

There was a buzz for attention from Kirk's belt as they moved through the glass and stone structure, past languidly strolling Draymians bent on other official missions.

Kirk opened the communicator, his voice thick. "Kirk here."

"Captain...?" That single word held a paragraph of worry.

"Sorry, Scotty, I forgot you were on hold. It seems - it seems there's going to be something of a delay here. Dr. McCoy's been arrested and -"

Over the kilometers and through the clouds the chief engineer's astonished yelp cut him off. "*DR. MCCOY ARRESTED?* What for...?"

Kirk tried to frame the word "genocide," found that the effort of linking that concept to McCoy brought him close to blackout.

"Murder," he finally managed to mutter.

"Murder?" Scott paused. When he spoke again, his voice was no longer querulous. "Sir, if you'd like me and some of the security specialists to beam down just in case, I'm sure there'd be no lack of volun..."

"Belay that kind of talk, Mr. Scott!" Kirk said, summoning his usual firmness. "The warrant itself appears to be legitimate, issued and authorized by the proper authorities. Mr. Spock and I are going to double-check it now. We're at the local administration building. I'll keep you posted."

"Should I put the ship on alert, sir?"

"No, Mr. Scott. While it may prove hard to restrain natural impulses, this is the time for careful consideration. The Draymians have been scrupulously correct about this. They've made nothing resembling a hostile gesture toward us. And, Scotty, this is not for general dissemination aboard. What I've just told you stays on the Bridge."

"Aye sir," Scott replied quietly.

"Kirk out."

It was all so absurd, Kirk mused, as they moved deeper into the enormous structure. Bones was no more guilty of mass murder than he was of unnecessarily vivisecting a frog. The good doctor was inherently incapable of either maliciousness or incompetence on such a scale.

And yet...

There *was* the official warrant, the insane accusation. He stared at the original communication where it was locked behind triple transparent barriers. Despite Demos' and the Prefect's confidence in his willingness to obey his own laws, Kirk found himself having to fight the urge to simply call Scotty to beam them up and out of this treacherous city. Such an action could precipitate an uncomfortable interstellar incident, he knew. The Draymians wouldn't hesitate to publicize it throughout the civilized galaxy. If the Federation didn't adhere to its own laws, why should potential allies be forced to?

He noticed that they had moved into a small office adjoining the well-guarded transmission. Demos sat across from them behind a large desk of white stone. He was answering most of the questions he had expected Kirk to ask.

"Dr. McCoy," the security chief explained, "headed a mass inoculation program against harmful diseases on Dramia II some nineteen of your subjective years ago.

"He was not yet - anointed? No, appointed - a full doctor at the time of this program. Soon after his small medical force departed, a massive plague struck. Fatalities were near total in the growing colony we'd established - established at much expense in life and wealth, Captain Kirk.

"The Dramia II colony constituted our first step away from our home world. Thanks to your Dr. McCoy, the result has been that for the past two decades we have been unable to progress any farther. Since the plague incident public reaction becomes virulent at the mere mention of deep-space exploration or settlement." He looked grim.

"Such has been the result of your *aid*."

"You talk about this plague," Kirk shot back tersely, "as if you were certain Bones was personally responsible for it. Just because it occurred at the same time doesn't mean it was his fault."

Demos leaned forward and displayed front canines. "Believe me, Captain Kirk, we would also like very much to have the rest of the medical team that served under him. However, it appears this is not possible. Therefore we will settle for having the one who was in charge of those responsible for the disaster. It is his responsibility, whether directly or otherwise!"

Demos sat back and looked satisfied. "It is enough."

"You talk as if you'd already tried him and found him guilty."

"Captain, you cannot imagine the kind of emotional reaction the mere mention of the Dramia II debacle stirs in the hearts of the people. Feeling runs high even among those who did not have friends or relatives among the dead. It was a ... a racial disaster. Furthermore, we could not even chance intensive study of the immediate causes lest we risk bringing the plague here, thus destroying our entire civilization. This has intensified the people's frustration and anger." He glanced away from Kirk.

"But after all these many years, we still can find no other possible cause than some carelessness on the part of Dr. McCoy and his medical team. As to his final guilt or innocence, the trial will say."

"Trial!" Kirk blurted. "Kangaroo court, you mean. By your own admission, Bones can hardly expect anything like a fair trial from your people. McCoy is a Federation citizen and -"

To every one of Kirk's plaints, Demos quietly referred to the copy of the maddening warrant, lying between them on his desk.

"His own government appears to feel that in this case such rights can properly be waived."

Kirk snorted derisively. "What kind of justice can Bones expect from a world that accepts our medical supplies with one hand and imprisons our medical officer with the other?"

"You are becoming emotional, Captain," Spock ventured.

"Of course I am!" Kirk shouted at his first officer, while Demos was muttering something about returning measure for measure.

"Bones harming other beings...," Kirk continued, "you know better, Spock. Anyone knows better than that - even those desk-bound morons at Administrative and Judicial know better."

The captain rambled on as Spock tried to calm him. Demos studied the two men with some detachment.

Alone - oh, how alone! - and forgotten, the fourth inhabitant of the tiny office rested his arms on his thighs and struggled to recall the events of nineteen years past. He found only hazy memories clouded by age. So much had happened since, so little had happened then...

Dramia II: colony, alien, Advanced Intern McCoy. His second extrasolar assignment, his first medical command. Draymia - bustling, alive, thriving. Dramia II - a bleak, chill world, but promising. Willing giants, fish-eyed - their nervous children already his own size. Weeks of boredom, routine, of looking at nothing but alien arms - his crew anxious to move on to another assignment, more challenging, nearer home, with better opportunities for advancement.

Nineteen years. What had those hundreds of inoculations been for? What had been the contents of those ampoules? An impurity overlooked, an imperfection in sealing - what? He had known so little then, and now he knew so much. If he could only go back, go back.

"I wish I could be as sure, Jim," a voice vaguely like his own finally murmured.

Conversation in the room died, and with McCoy's words, something inside Kirk died a little, too.

II

At least the cell they put him in was comfortable.

It had no bars, and the larger chamber was no more than normally oppressive, as jails went. The furnishings within the cell were simple, but at least they were sized to McCoy's non-Draymian proportions.

"I just can't be positive," he was mumbling from behind the lightly radiant force-field. He had been talking to himself like that ever since Demos and a patrol of oversized Draymians had escorted him to this forlorn waiting place.

"Is it possible that I somehow was, somehow am responsible for the -"

"Ridiculous!" Kirk objected sharply.

"There is surely," Spock added with his usual assurance, "ample reason to believe that the termination of your inoculation program and the subsequent outbreak of plague on the Dramia II colony is coincidence."

"There's also ample reason to believe that it was a tragic mistake of some kind on my part," McCoy whispered.

"I don't buy that, Bones," Kirk said firmly. "I'm not going to sit around and let someone else sell it to the Federation, either."

"You have something in mind, Captain," Spock responded. It was not a question.

Kirk turned. "A little pretrial investigation, Mr. Spock. A bit of harmless fact gathering - independent fact gathering - to aid Draymian justice." He gestured.

One of the several guards in the chamber moved to the wall, touched a series of switches on a small hand control. The

secondary force-field vanished, and Kirk and Spock moved clear. The guard touched another combination and the backup field flamed up again, leaving McCoy totally isolated.

Kirk flipped open his communicator without a backward glance. "Kirk to *Enterprise* - beam us up, Mr. Scott."

"How many, Captain?"

"Two. Just two, Mr. Scott."

"Captain," the chief engineer's voice began, "I think -"

"Beam up, Scotty - now," Kirk repeated.

"Aye, sir."

The twin dissolution that followed was colorful, not destructive. McCoy was left alone in his cell. Well, not entirely alone.

The single guard who remained after Kirk and Spock had departed strolled over and peered curiously at the prisoner. He knew of the Terran's reputed crime. It was an honor to be one of those assigned to watch him, to be one of the few designated to see to his health - so he would be fit and well for the trial.

McCoy did not object to serving as the bug in an alien bottle. He was too depressed to think coherently about anything save his own sudden, shocking change of fortune.

"Your friends may scour the surface of Dramia II to the bedrock," the guard informed the despondent figure within the cage. "They will find nothing to save you. We are a civilized race. Our court system is swift and efficient." In the manner of all jailers, he grinned at his own ironic joke.

As is universally the case with prisoners subjected to such humor, McCoy did not find it amusing.

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Words alternated with pictures alternated with charts. Sometimes all three combined on the lab screen to form an especially brilliant and impressive display. The men studying it now were not interested in superficialities, however. They were hunting desperately for a clue to a friend's salvation, and they were not having much luck.

Kirk moved from a small computer annex which was connected to the central computer to stare at the other screen over Spock's shoulder. While Spock was running backward through time, the captain was triple checking the legal fine points of the Federation warrant - to no avail. It was as solid as a warp-drive equation.

"Anything yet, Mr. Spock?"

"No, Captain." The first officer did not turn from the steady flow of information pouring across the screen in front of him. "Our historical records for the Draymian system are few, going back barely two standard decades. Dr. McCoy's medical team was one of the first Federation groups to visit here."

"Kind of unusual, isn't it - for a medical team to be called into a new system so soon after initial contact is opened?"

"Yes, Captain. But apparently the Draymian need was considerable. Understandably Starfleet felt that if we did not respond to their request for assistance, someone else might be only too happy to oblige. The Klingons, for example."

"Granted," Kirk admitted. As usual, Spock's assessment of the situation was infallible.

"Most of the information available on early Federation contact with the Draymians comes from the technical survey teams - planetary and solar data, geophysical statistics - the usual enormous mass of pure information which takes many years to properly integrate and codify for easy computer retrieval."

Abruptly the rapid stream of lines and words froze on screen. Spock pressed another switch and several significant paragraphs blossomed into easily readable lines.

DRAMIA II, LOCAL COLONIZATION, HISTORY OF.

"It's about time," Kirk muttered.

The two officers ran through a mass of detail until they came to: *Plague, Dramia II, colony of Draymia. Origin unknown, characterized by pigmentation shift in skin of victim, debilitation, followed by the onset of terminal coma. Theoretically can affect several species of humanoid including man, quorman, and others. Those dead from exposure included corpsman Micheau Pochenko, anesthesiologist Severin Alonzo Hart.*

Spock glanced back at Kirk. "It appears that two of Dr. McCoy's own team also died from the plague. Our Draymian hosts neglected to mention that. *Certain species*," he read, turning back to the screen, "*believed to be naturally immune, notably Tauran and Vulcan.* Interesting."

"Go on, Mr. Spock," Kirk prompted, ignoring the parade of legalese across his own, now unwatched screen...

***

Done with taunting the unresponsive prisoner, the guard reported to Demos what he'd overheard when the murderer had spoken with his two superiors.

"You are certain?"

"Yes, my commander," the guard insisted stiffly. "The Federation Captain is planning to visit Dramia II to gather material negative to our case against human filth, McCoy."

"Thank you, guard. Speak of this to no one else, please. You may leave."

"It shall be as you desire, Commander." The guard saluted and left.

Demos sat thinking for several minutes. There was no telling what distortion of truth the clever Federation officers might glean from the poor, blighted ruin of Dramia II. But the people

of Draymia had waited stoically for their revenge these past years. He, Demos, was not about to see them deprived of it. Whatever tricks, whatever perversion of logic Captain Kirk could concoct from the ruined colony must not go unobserved. And this was not something he could trust to underlings.

He activated a switch within the bonelike mass of the desk, a switch that didn't appear to exist.

"Ready my personal skiff immediately..."

***

Kirk was aware he was proceeding without proper authority. But he wasn't about to contact Starfleet for permission - after all, that *proper authority* had issued the damning warrant in the first place. They could call him on the deck afterward - after he had proven Bones' innocence.

"Estimated time of arrival, Mr. Sulu?"

Sulu checked a readout, reported, "Four hours ship time, sir."

"Move it up a little if the computer can handle the acceleration compensation. The Draymians will *probably* stick to their normal courtroom procedure. However, this is a special case to them, and they may be interested in rushing it to completion. Also, we've no idea how long it may take us to turn up proof of Bones' innocence.

"Demos, their security chief, emphasized the civilized nature of his people. But if it becomes public information that the government is now holding the being they consider responsible for the extinction of their sole off-planet colony, I wouldn't be surprised to see a spirit of vigilantism take over."

"Do not confuse human and alien motivation, Captain," advised Spock.

"I wish that were a uniquely human tendency, Mr. Spock. Unfortunately, it appears from stellar history that we've no monopoly on mob law."

"Unfortunate, indeed, Captain."

Spock's observation had ramifications that Kirk would have liked to pursue but the captain's thoughts were interrupted by a call from the helm.

"Ship in pursuit, Captain."

"Origin?"

Sulu hurriedly checked sensors. "Undoubtedly from Draymia, sir. I'm running the recorder back - here it is, no bigger than a two-man scout."

"Full magnification of the aft screen."

"I'm on full, sir."

Kirk squinted at the screen, which showed only distant stars. "I don't see anything, Mr. Sulu."

"No, sir. Sensors had it for only a moment. The ship apparently was following just out of maximum scanner range. When we suddenly increased our speed, its pilot jumped to stay with us and for a second or two, over-compensated. He's dropped back out of detector range again."

"But not transmission range," Uhura observed. "Shall I attempt contact, Captain?"

"No, Lieutenant, not just yet."

"May I inquire as to the reason?" This from a curious Spock.

"We seem to have two choices, Mr. Spock. We can let this busybody - who is obviously out to make things difficult for us, else he wouldn't be skulking about our stern - continue to think he's succeeding at his game. Or we can try to make things easier for him."

"Easier, Captain? I fail to understand."

"He could certainly cause us more trouble at a crucial moment by sneaking aboard. That would be simple for him to do, since

we've carelessly left open the doors to the Shuttlecraft Bay."

"Captain, the doors aren't open," Uhura pointed out.

"Oh, yes - take care of that little undersight, will you, Mr. Sulu? Mr. Spock, issue a general order - all internal lights near exterior ports, all observation lounge illumination, to be extinguished.

"As far as I know, no Draymian has ever been aboard a Federation cruiser while it was in transit. They know as little about us as we do about them. I'd like to give the impression that most of the crew is off-duty, asleep."

"Anyone approaching would assume we still have automatic detectors operational, Captain."

"Any representative of a seasoned space-traveling race would, Mr. Spock. But the Draymians are new at this. Besides, we've already given in to their demands to hand over Bones. Why would we have defensive screens up within their system, when we've already shown we abide by the law?

"Whoever's back there is convinced he's eluded us so far. Let's at least give him the opportunity to elude us a little farther..."

The lights went out aboard the great starship. On board his small skiff, Demos saw them fade.

He only had suppositions about Federation habits with which to judge the situation, but there had been no sign from the cruiser that his presence had been detected yet. If it had, he couldn't understand not receiving at least a querulous hail. So the decision he reached was precisely the one Kirk was hoping he would.

He edged his tiny vessel ahead - slowly at first, then, as silence continued, with increasing confidence. If the big ship's hangar doors were not automatic, he would be forced to use a suit.

The skiff slid silently into the cavernous hold and settled to a stop. Atmospheric considerations vanished when the hangar

doors closed behind him and gauges monitored the rise of air pressure outside. The hold was empty of personnel, but not of concealment. Demos slipped his craft between two others, concealing it from all but direct view. In size and shape it did not differ enough from a Federation scout to immediately catch the attention of some idly strolling crew member. Of course, these were all rationalizations. But the chance to actually inspect the inner workings of a Federation battle cruiser was too tempting to Demos' martial mentality for him to pass by.

Let him have two time-parts ... one even...

He found the door leading to the first access corridor and peered cautiously through the transparent port set in its upper third. The passageway beyond was deserted. Opening the door and stooping slightly to avoid the overhead arch, he made his way into the empty main corridor.

If he could just find someplace to secrete himself for a while till he got his bearings...

The next doorway had no port. He would have to take a chance. The opening mechanism was clearly marked and easily operated. He activated it and the door slid aside.

Reflexively, he reached for the weapon at his belt.

"Not now, Demos, you're hardly in a position to take on the entire crew," Kirk murmured evenly.

The hand dipping toward the gun relaxed, continued smoothly onwards to scratch at an imaginary itch on his leg.

"And you," he countered with a touch of impatience, "are not in authority to conduct an investigation in this system."

Kirk's tone was conciliatory as he turned to his first officer. "You will remind me to report my unbecoming attitude to the Federation, won't you, Spock?"

"Of course, Captain."

"I demand you report to your superiors now, and that I be permitted to sit in on -"

"Actually, Demos," Kirk interrupted, "you're hardly in a position to demand much of anything. But I'll surprise you, I think, by saying that I'll happily oblige. Unfortunately, we're out of communications range with Starfleet Central at the moment."

"Report to the nearest Starbase, then -"

"Sorry, you asked me to report to my *superiors*. By your own admission, exceeding our authority to conduct this type of investigation is a matter for consideration at the highest levels. And I wouldn't *think* of insulting you by laying the matter before some minor functionary."

"Then, I myself will proceed to your Starbase and report this violation for you." Demos turned and started back down the corridor, feeling strangely flat eyes on the back of his head.

"I'm afraid your ship has been impounded, Commander, for your own protection."

Demos whirled, furious. "My own protec -"

"You'd never reach Starbase with it."

"So *you* say," Demos muttered angrily. "Just as you say you are out of communications range with your Central Headquarters."

"Yes, and there's something else I say," Kirk went on, now even more firmly.

"You are a stowaway, Commander," Spock informed the angry security chief. "You are in violation, I believe, of one of your own laws."

Demos started to say something, but his words became tangled as a sudden realization of his situation set in. "You planned it ... you planned this so that it would appear legal, so that my abduction would not seem to break any laws."

"We merely offered you the chance to realize your own desires, Demos," Kirk replied firmly. "I seem to recall a similar course of action recently taken against a Federation citizen by your own government. You wouldn't happen to remember the name of that unlucky individual, would you? His name was McCoy, Leonard McCoy. Maybe now you can sympathize with his situation a little more, Commander. In fact, I'd think you'd begin to acquire a personal interest in it."

"I have a personal interest in seeing justice done," Demos snapped, drawing himself up.

"Excellent." Kirk turned to leave. "Mr. Spock, see to the Commander's comfort. It's good to hear he's after the same thing we are..."

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Dramia II loomed on the screen before them, a brown and red crescent splotched only fitfully with greens and blues. A harsh-looking world on which to try to mold a new civilization.

The Draymians had been courageous enough to try. They had been rewarded with death and desolation.

Ironically, the vacuum surrounding that stark planet blazed with beauty. Dramia II swam in the midst of one of the massive deep-space auroras for which the Dramian system had first been noted. Brilliant reds, purples, and blues glowed under powerful bombardment from Dramia's sun, forming a fiery curtain in space. Several shifting, metallic streamers draped themselves across the planet, masking portions of it with ionized glory.

"Lovely phenomenon."

"Yes, Captain," Spock agreed. "According to records, it is one of several such scattered through the system. It was the highlight of the first Federation survey here." He nodded toward the screen.

"This band of particulate matter is the farthest out from the sun itself."

"I see. Surface radiation level, Mr. Sulu?"

"Still working on it, Captain."

A moment, then, "I see the figures," Spock reported. "The level is strong, but nowhere lethal. There are some as yet unclassifiable aspects to the readings obtained where one of the auroral streamers intersects the atmosphere of Dramia II, which -"

Kirk cut him short. "We'll have time for research after we secure Dr. McCoy's release."

"Yes, Captain."

Nearby, Demos made a derisive sound.

"All I'm concerned about is that it's safe for us to beam down," Kirk continued. "Since it appears to be ... shall we, gentlemen?" He rose from the command chair and started for the elevator door, followed by Spock and Demos.

Scott was waiting for them in the transporter room. He voiced his own concerns immediately.

"Are you sure it's safe, Captain?"

"As safe as our sensors are sure, Scotty. Absolutely."

"Not absolutely, Captain. Our sensing equipment is never absolutely sure," Spock corrected.

Kirk grinned, looked over at Demos who was studying the transporter alcove with what seemed like momentary hesitation.

"Mr. Spock, you're not trying to scare our Draymian comrade, are you? You can still remain aboard if you wish, Commander."

The Draymian chief of security stared evenly back at him. "I came to make certain you fabricated no intricate lies, Captain Kirk. I go."

He stepped up into the transporter and assumed a somewhat cramped pose of readiness.

"You heard him, Mr. Scott. Energize."

Scott looked unhappy, but set about the familiar operation. He adjusted the necessary switches, pulled the requisite levers. There was the familiar whine of complaining atoms, and the three figures were gone...

Three pillars of shattered crystal solidified on the sandy surface and shaped themselves into upright containers of intelligence.

Kirk stumbled slightly on rematerialization - the surface underfoot was loose and windblown. Part of the region they had set down in was still verdant. Trees and hedgerows of Draymian flora had been planted here.

But the irrigation systems had broken down under nineteen years of neglect. The desert had encroached ever more boldly on what had once been the fertile periphery of the two colony towns.

Around them lay the battered, partially decomposed remains of homes and warehouses and offices - evidence of angry winds, of sand pitted against walls. Dunes were piled up to the sills of windows devoid of glass, which stared with vacant sockets at the advancing drifts.

Here and there were signs of old fires. Kirk hoped they had been caused by natural means and not by the last vestiges of isolated, panicked sentience. Reversion from civilization to barbarism in a single generation was never very pretty, no matter which world was involved.

The physical detritus was sobering. He could imagine what that final, plague-rotted collapse must have been like. Still, it was one thing to imagine and quite another to stand in the midst of such imaginings. His quota of sympathy for the Draymians went up another notch, though the sight of this graveyard of hopes did nothing to shake his confidence in McCoy's innocence.

"Not the most enchanting scene I've ever beheld," he finally murmured.

"Plague seldom leaves behind fields of flowers and dancing children, Captain."

Kirk glared angrily at the security chief, who simply stared over the Captain's head with the serene gaze of the self-righteous. Spock raised an eyebrow.

"There must have been local medical facilities - one central hospital, at least. I would assume they are less severely damaged than these structures here, as logic dictates they would be the last buildings to be abandoned. It would be a good place to begin our search."

Again, Demos made that strange Draymian shrug. "As you wish. This is so hopeless. Why not depart our system in peace, now, and leave destiny to take its inevitable course?"

"I'm afraid," Kirk said tightly, "that inevitable is a word I'm not familiar with. If you could direct us...?"

Demos turned and pointed toward a slightly higher cluster of ruins lying near the approximate center of the first town.

"That must be what remains of the communications station. According to Draymian town plan, the medical facilities should have been built several blocks further north and a little to the east."

Kirk nodded curtly, and they slogged off through thick sand in the indicated direction. Soon after they started their progress improved as the clinging sand gave way to pockmarked but still serviceable pavement.

They were in the outskirts of the town proper when they noticed something moving on their right - moving sharply and jerkily, it was neither subtle nor inconspicuous. All three marchers saw it. Surprisingly, it was Demos who looked fearful while they surveyed the rubble.

"Some danger?" Kirk wondered. Demos' eyes studied the rim of the debris with practiced skill.

"If you remember, Captain Kirk, I said that *nearly* everyone on Dramia II was killed. There were reports of some survivors by later survey crews - which did not touch down, of course. I think 'survivors' is an overly optimistic classification for any pitiful souls forever marooned here.

"One drone was sent down some eight years ago. It was at that time that these survivors acquired a reputation for not liking outsiders."

"Hardly surprising," Spock commented, "in view of what they must feel. They could not be expected to act logically. But surely you cannot be considered an outsider, Commander. You are as Draymian as they. I should think the sight of a fellow being would fill them with pleasure."

"The sight of a fellow *Draymian* might," Demos replied, with a bitter half-chuckle. "But there are no Draymians left on this world ... not as we know them. The gulf between us now is that which separates the living and the walking dead."

There was more movement to the far right of the crumbled wall they were watching. Kirk would never have noticed it had he not been looking idly at that exact spot when the figure decided to abandon the area.

"Walking dead he may be but he still has some spirit left in him. He mustn't get away!"

Kirk started on the run after the retreating biped. Spock moved up quickly alongside. Demos hesitated for several long seconds. Apparently deciding it would be better to go along than remain alone in the open street, he raced after them. Enormous strides quickly caught him up to the two smaller men.

Had the figure been healthy it undoubtedly could have lost its pursuers easily in the maze of tumbling walls and hollowed-out structures. The few glances they had of it showed it to be ragged and hunched. It ran with a peculiar loping gait.

"There, Captain," Spock husked, "it went around that mound."

The mound had once served as the foundation for a higher, silo-like building. Now it was all crumbled in on itself, a concrete caldera. Sharp-edged blocks of broken masonry protruded here and there from the circular heap.

They rounded the hillock - and came to a sudden halt on the other side. The pavement here was open for several meters in every direction, save where the furrowed brow of a cliff-faced hill backed into the town. There were no structures, tumbled or otherwise, that their limping quarry could have reached in time to conceal himself before they had rounded the ruin.

"I was afraid of that," Kirk panted. "He's got some secret cubbyhole he's slipped into. Almost looks like someone pulled him out with a transporter."

"Hardly likely, Captain," Spock observed drily. He moved toward the cliff-face while Demos and Kirk stood surveying the nearest ruins.

"I believe your initial supposition was correct, Captain," Spock soon called to them. They walked over to where he stood, staring into a vertical slit in the naked stone.

The crevice wasn't wide, but by turning sideways and holding his breath, a Draymian could squeeze through. It would be easier for Kirk and Spock.

Spreading out as far as possible to cover one another, the two officers from the *Enterprise* approached the opening. Nothing inorganic and unpleasant issued to meet them.

They started in. It grew darker ... and then it didn't.

"Light inside," Kirk murmured softly. "Can't be a cave, then."

"Possibly one whose roof has collapsed wholly or partially," his first officer theorized. They continued to edge forward, hugging the cold rock wall. A grainy tenor sounded behind them.

"I would advise against this, Captain," Demos said. "Dramia II is little visited. We have no idea what kind of mutations the plague may have spawned among the local life-forms, of which several..."

"Save the biology lecture, Demos. You won't mind if I ignore your advice."

"Extreme caution in this restricted area would seem advisable, Captain."

"I'll watch myself, Spock, but I'm not going to lose that survivor. There may not be any others nearby, and we haven't much time. Also, if this one escapes, he may warn others of our presence. We may never spot another one."

The captain moved forward steadily, trying to make as little noise on the gravel underfoot as possible. "Bones' life is on the line, Mr. Spock. I don't mind taking a few risks."

The light dimmed until it was almost dark, but it never died entirely. Ahead he could detect patches of brightness. A few more steps, and Kirk emerged into a broad chamber.

Spock had been right. They stood in a cave whose ceiling had collapsed in places. The floor was dotted with mounds of fallen roof. He looked around, but there was no sign of their quarry.

Water waxed the rock dark and shiny where it issued in a steady trickle from cracks in a rock face. The tiny rivulets formed a small pool. Shade from the desert sun, protection from unrestricted carnivores, and water. His senses sharpened - this *had* to be their limping refugee's home. Kirk hoped they hadn't scared him out of it.

"Captain ... are you all right?" Kirk snapped back to wakefulness, aware that Spock and Demos were waiting for his okay to proceed.

"All clear, Mr. Spock, come ahead." Kirk walked to the edge of the pool, nudged a pile of charred wood with his foot. "Cave dwellers," he muttered, "in a civilization as high as Draymia's."

"The result of your Dr. McCoy and his *civilized* medicine," the security chief responded coldly. Kirk whirled.

"Look, Demos, I'm getting a mite sick of your steady accusations. Until you can prove -"

A shadow suddenly detached itself from its dark companions and flung itself forward. It was no less gargoylish in form than its inorganic brothers.

At one time it had doubtless been intelligent - an intelligence now transcended by the madness shining in its eyes. It landed just behind Kirk, knocking him to the ground, and began flailing at him in frantic, howling anguish.

Momentarily stunned, Kirk couldn't dislodge his assailant, because of the latter's sheer bulk and unthinking rage. Fortunately, the same blind fury that drove the pitiable specimen to attack Kirk saved the captain from any serious harm, for the Draymian struck aimlessly, with neither skill nor design. Thus Kirk was able to shield himself from all the wild blows until Spock and Demos could wrestle the hysterical figure away.

The captain rolled over, his only injury a lack of breath.

"Captain..."

"Okay, Spock ... I'm okay. He *wanted* to hurt me more than he actually did."

"And why do you think he attacked you, Captain?" asked Demos, struggling to restrain the gradually subsiding madman.

Kirk got to his feet, spoke slowly. "I was the nearest to his hiding place." Demos indicated the negative.

"You are also the only human among us, Captain Kirk. Don't attempt to evade the obvious. You were attacked because you are human - as is Dr. McCoy."

Damn you, Demos, Kirk cried silently. *And damn this whole insane system.* But he said nothing, merely dusted his uniform and moved to study the captive.

Fear had been replaced on the latter's face by remorse, anger by sorrow and misery; and that initial cry of fury became an utterly heart-rending whimper. Clearly the creature was no longer a threat.

"Let him go," Kirk whispered.

"Are you sure, Captain?" Spock asked.

Kirk stared into the captive's eyes. They didn't meet his own. Instead they were focused on some other, greater horror now - one too distant to encompass the three figures around him.

Cautiously, Demos and Spock turned Kirk's assailant loose. That tortured soul turned, took two steps, and fell to his knees. He dropped onto his side and just lay there, moaning and sobbing uncontrollably.

Now Kirk knew they had to find *absolute*, incontrovertible proof that Bones was innocent. Supposition and verbal reasoning were not going to sway the decision of people who had been subjected to reports of this kind of emotional and mental destruction.

Nevertheless, he couldn't keep from voicing the inner certainty that kept him going.

"Demos, you've got to believe me. Dr. McCoy could never be responsible for something like ... like that." He gestured to where the insane being gibbered mindlessly on the stone floor.

"Good intentions cannot wipe out the existence of evil results, Captain."

"But how did this one survive the plague?" Kirk wondered aloud, when an especially tortured howl rose from the no-longer-dangerous survivor.

Demos explained. "He and a few others were away, on the home world and elsewhere, when the plague struck. They returned before they could be stopped, to find everyone they'd known - loved ones, companions, everyone - dead of the plague.

"They chose to remain, to live here in the home they had once known." The security chief's voice was close to cracking. "Nineteen years of grief - there are worse plagues than those caused by germs. You see now, Captain Kirk, there were no actual survivors on Dramia II."

III

"I *thought* I heard sounds of fighting, and voices!"

The words that penetrated to the startled listeners were clear and strong, ringing loud in the cave.

"You're wrong, whoever you are," it continued. "There was at least one survivor."

A tall Draymian was walking toward them, climbing over a rocky hillock formed by part of the fallen ceiling. His clothes were ragged, his countenance worn, but otherwise he resembled Demos far more than he did the twisted figure rolling about on the cave floor.

"I was not found by any of the observation parties, nor by the crews of those ships which came to leave the mourners here. But I survived the plague - by what miracle I do not know. I'd given up hope of ever being rescued."

"You must remember what it was like, then," Kirk began excitedly. "During the plague ... you can tell us."

"I remember," the newcomer nodded, oblivious to Demos' unbelieving stare. "I remember the people around me, even the doctors, turning blue, then green, and finally a dull red color, collapsing, strength ebbing, then..."

He stopped, his strong voice fading, the last softly whispered words echoing down hidden pathways in the cave.

"The pigmentation changes associated with the disease, as mentioned in the records, Captain," Spock commented.

Kirk nodded quickly, keeping his attention focused on the survivor. "You *must* remember," he asked anxiously, "before the plague struck, there was a visiting mission here from the

Federation, a medical mission that included humans among its personnel.

"They were led by a man named McCoy - Dr. Leonard McCoy, He was responsible for seeing to the vaccination of the entire colony. He must have treated you too ... or at least overseen your treatment. *Do you remember him?*"

Kirk had no idea what to expect from the long-isolated alien, surviving amidst the ruins of a forgotten colony and its unstable inhabitants. Some hesitation, surely - a first imperfect attempt at resurrecting a faint memory of a distasteful past.

Instead, the survivor brightened immediately and spoke as though he were talking of yesterday.

"A Terran physician, young - of course, I remember Dr. McCoy. How could I forget the being who saved my life?"

Despite social and physical interspecies differences, the glances that passed then among Kirk, Demos and Spock needed no interpretation.

"Then that is also the man," Demos finally declared, "who is responsible for the death of this colony." And he waved at the surrounding desolation.

The survivor was neither intimidated nor impressed - as one might expect of a being who had successfully survived among the corpses of thousands, living and dead. He stared evenly back at the Commander of Draymian security.

"We knew little of the Federation and its various races, those many years ago," he began slowly. "It has been a long time. Perhaps we know more of them now. But I believe that even those many triads ago we knew that the differences between us were not great.

"Although I knew this Dr. McCoy very briefly, I think I came to know him well. I cannot believe you are speaking of the same person who saved my life." The survivor looked thoughtful, reminiscing.

"At times he appeared less than positive, yes, and sometimes gave the impression of hesitation. But he did everything with a kindness and concern for the afflicted that was honest. You, Commander whoever-you-are..."

"Demos, of Draymian Internal Security."

"Well, Demos, Commander of Draymian Security, I, Kolti, think you have the wrong man," he concluded firmly. "One who saves does not also murder."

Demos threw Kolti a stare of frustration and anger; but the survivor had seen far worse things these past years than the gaze of the overbearing security chief. He gave no sign of altering his story or his regard for Dr. McCoy.

A smile had replaced Kirk's concerned stare. Spock's eyebrows ascended as the captain inquired, "So you're certain it was this Dr. McCoy who saved you?"

"Indeed, this is so."

"It's been several lifetimes for you, Kolti," Kirk observed, eyeing the tall Draymian appraisingly, "and I know you're anxious to be home."

"I've outgrown impatience," Kolti told them softly.

"You look like the sort of intelligent being who would place certain things above personal comfort. You've heard what your security chief says. Dr. McCoy saved your life. Not many have an opportunity to repay such a debt. You do.

"Will you delay your return to friends and family long enough to help clear his name and prevent a permanent stain from entering the annals of Draymian justice?"

"I would not be here to be offered the choice were it not for your Dr. McCoy. I will do whatever you ask of me."

Kirk nodded. He had his proof ... committed proof, from a source which could neither be argued with nor intimidated. He pulled out the communicator.

"Mr. Scott ... beam us aboard, all four of us. And quickly - we may have spent too much time here already."

"Aye aye, sir," came the chief engineer's enthusiastic response.

Near the back of the cavern, by broken shards of limestone and shale, a rocking, moaning figure suddenly rolled upright and ceased its whimpers as the miracle took place before its eyes. Fragments of the sun appeared and swallowed up the four figures.

It was over quickly. Then he was alone in his cave again with the nearby water and approaching night...

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Kirk was stepping down from the alcove and speaking as soon as full reintegration finished.

"Get me the Bridge, Mr. Scott." Scott activated the transporter console intercom, stepped aside as Kirk took up station behind it.

"Sulu, Arex, get under way immediately. Back to Draymia, at top intersystem speed."

Acknowledgment came back over the speaker, and Kirk clicked off, then saw Scott staring at the ragged but unbent Kolti.

"I know you told me to beam up four, and four I beamed up, Captain. But, who is *that?*"

"A Dramian friend of Dr. McCoy's."

"A *Dramian* friend...?"

Scott broke off in astonishment but continued to gaze open-mouthed at Kolti. The survivor stepped gingerly from the transporter alcove and stared in amazement around him. Scott walked around the console and extended a hand to the bemused alien.

"I don't know where you've been hiding yourself, laddie, but somehow I get the feelin' you've got to be a clan member in good standin'. What's your tartan like?"

"Clan member ... tartan?" Kolti wondered aloud as Kirk and Spock conducted him toward the turbolift, with Demos trailing along.

"Merely Mr. Scott's way of saying that we find in you a kindred spirit which heretofore has seemed lacking in your people." Spock turned pensive. "We may still be too late to save Dr. McCoy. Even if we are not, your testimony may not be enough to shift the tide of feeling which has been raised against him. But there is historical precedent - instances where the courage of one has been enough to overcome the reckless emotionalism of many."

"Spock's trying to say," Kirk explained tautly, "that we think you've got the guts to go through with this." He waved off Kolti's reply. "Be modest later, after we've saved McCoy. For now, Mr. Spock, conduct Kolti to Sick Bay. Have Nurse Chapel check him out completely. Pull everything we've got on Draymian medicine. And see that he has anything he wants."

"I would settle, Captain Kirk," Kolti murmured, "for some food and a clean bed."

Kirk nodded, turned back to Scott. "I want you to push the navigation computer, Scotty. Get us to Draymia as fast as possible - overshoot, if necessary. Minutes may count. The Draymians," he finished, glancing up at Demos, "are impatient for their revenge."

"Most assuredly," the security chief confirmed.

"I'll pour on the coal, Captain," Scott grinned.

They were ten minutes out from Dramia II and nearing Draymia when Kirk finally relaxed from the hysteria of last-minute emergency preparations long enough to check with Sick Bay.

"Mr. Spock, are you still with our patient?"

"Affirmative, Captain," the calm voice came back.

"How's he doing?"

"A moment, Captain..." Spock glanced back to where Kolti was sleeping the sleep of the exhausted in the infirmary bed behind him.

Only Spock had noticed how utterly fatigued their passenger was. He had gone along with the other's pose, admiring the silent fortitude as he had answered questions for both Kirk and then Chapel. As was the case with most sophonts, his expression was far more truthful in sleep.

Chapel hurried past him, to adjust the makeshift instrumentation rigged over the slumberer's bed.

"He appears to be in reasonably good health though terribly debilitated and worn out. At the moment he is resting quietly. A brave man, Captain."

"Brave enough to be the unimpeachable witness we need, I hope," Kirk replied. He glanced up at the main viewscreen. Their truncated course was taking them through the body of one of the magnificent intersystem auroras. "Let's hope the trial hasn't already begun."

Sulu spoke to him. "Approaching Draymia orbit, sir."

"You heard, Spock? I think we can get Demos to beam down to put a hold on the proceedings long enough until our witness is fit to appear before a legal assemblage and to answer questions."

"The trial may be academic, Captain."

Kirk sat straighter in his chair. Spock's voice had abruptly taken on a new tone, even as always but touched now with a faint twinge of ... worry?

"What's the trouble, Mr. Spock?"

At the other end of the comm, the *Enterprise*'s first officer was once more studying the sleeping Kolti. The survivor of Dramia II still rested quietly ... but the expression on his face was no longer content. Nor was that the most noticeable change in his features.

"Captain, Kolti is turning blue."

Very blue. Normally a creamy chalcedony in color, the alien's skin had shifted to a pale shade of cerulean. The color shift might have seemed-amusing to some, at worst worrying. But the implications were neither of a humorous nor of a mildly upsetting nature. The implications were deadly.

Especially for one Leonard McCoy, M.D., USSIT

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Kirk touched the switch and the door dilated, admitting him to Sick Bay. Followed closely by Spock and Demos, he rushed to the quarantine chamber where Kolti had been isolated hurriedly. Chapel was at the Draymian's bedside, taking readings with a modified medical tricorder.

"I'm sorry, Captain," she finally said. "Everything correlates with the readings the built-ins give. I have no idea what..."

"Plague!" Demos gasped after only a quick glance at the prone Draymian.

Kirk spun on the security chief. If there was any foul play at work here, any attempt to offer up McCoy as scapegoat by eliminating his only convincing witness ... His suspicions were dulled by two things - the fear in the commander's voice and the expression on his face. Not even a master Draymian thespian, he suspected, could have managed to conjure up a look of such pure terror.

"Seal off this entire infirmary, Lieutenant Chapel. No one else is to be admitted, no one is to leave." Chapel darted to the nearest intercom to issue the requisite order, all the while working with the recalibrated tricorder.

Spock was bent over the motionless form of Kolti. "I know little Draymian physiology, Captain, and even less of their reactions to specific diseases. But consider that Kolti has been through nearly twenty of our years of extreme privation. When brought aboard he was weak, undernourished and on the verge of physical collapse.

"Now ... this. Plague or not, he is no longer in a condition to submit testimony at any kind of trial."

"We've got to save him," Kirk added quietly.

Demos smirked. "For McCoy's sake."

"Yes, for McCoy's sake!" Kirk shot back angrily. "And for Kolti's sake, too." He stood close to the Draymian officer and stared up at the towering biped, for all the world like a terrier challenging a mastiff.

"You see, Commander, we place considerable value on lives other than our own. Does that shock you?"

Demos was suddenly tongue-tied. Kirk's reaction had been unexpectedly violent. Or maybe it was the human's smaller size and controlled politeness which had deceived him till now. He could only begin to stammer, "It is not that..."

His jaw dropped and his pop-eyes bulged frighteningly.

Kirk studied him curiously. Surely the brief outburst couldn't have stunned him *this* much.

"Captain..." There was something in Spock's voice...

Kirk wasn't sure where the impulse originated, but he had a sudden urge to look down at himself. He held up his hands, then slowly turned them over. The palms were blue. Recently examined records welled up in his mind.

Certain species, such as Tauran and Vulcan, are immune. Others ... The thought died away as he finished, to himself, "...such as human, are ... not."

"Chapel ... Lieutenant Chapel..." He was walking with increasingly rapid steps towards the door leading to the head nurse's office.

She was there ... sprawled across her desk and turning a rich hue of azure even as he stared.

"Mr. Scott, Chief Kyle, others exposed - quarantine too late," he called back to Spock ... even as his lower leg muscles turned to water and he slumped to his knees.

Demos weakly reached out a hand to catch him. The Draymian Commander had become sky-colored. Kirk muttered, his head swimming.

"Vulcan immunity! Mr. Spock, take ... take command." He tried to add something else; but though his mouth moved, no words came forth.

Spock caught him before he collapsed completely. He carried Kirk to an empty bed, then went back and transferred Chapel. He tried to do likewise for the massive Demos; but the Draymian commander's bulk defeated him, and he had no time to wrestle with the huge form. He settled for making Demos as comfortable as possible on the infirmary floor.

Two things must be done immediately - depending on the condition Of the crew. It was not good. As Spock made his way toward the bridge, he saw other crew members sprawled where they had fallen, with still-healthy companions trying to aid them. Quarantine appeared to be out of the question. This mysterious affliction spread too fast.

It took hold with alarming speed, the effects irresistible and overwhelming. He ordered the healthy crew members to make the ill as comfortable as possible right where they were found, and then to return to their own posts to continue functioning as long as they were able. It was a brutal, unavoidable order to have to give.

No one argued, no one objected. After all, this was the *Enterprise*.

The situation was no better on the Bridge. Only Sulu still retained anything like his normal color. But even he was showing signs of initial blueness. He did manage to aid Spock in placing the ship into proper orbit around Draymia.

Posterity came next, before survival. He assumed Kirk's seat and activated the recorder.

"Captain's Log, supplemental. First Officer Spock in command, recording.

"We are in orbit around the planet Draymia under conditions of general quarantine. The situation is critical. We have apparently contracted the plague which wiped out the Draymian colony on Dramia II. Nearly the entire ship's complement has already been affected, some seriously.

"A few have shown slightly stronger resistance than others, but this appears transitory. As Acting Commanding Officer, I have ordered the activation of General Order Six." Spock paused, looked over to where Sulu was turning a deep blue color.

"Has the General Order been engaged, Lieutenant?"

"Yes ... sir," the helmsman replied, painfully, slowly.

"If everyone on board has perished or been rendered incapable of action at the end of a twenty-four-hour period," Spock continued, "and the computer has not been contacted with proper authority to cancel, the ship will self-destruct in order to protect other beings from the disease."

As he completed the entry - the last entry, perhaps - he reflected on the irony of the situation. It seemed that Dr. McCoy might outlive them all.

"Interesting," he whispered.

"What, sir?" asked Sulu.

"Report to Sick Bay, Lieutenant."

Sulu's voice was growing thick, unintelligible. "But sir ... you need someone ... to monitor ... to..."

"I gave you an order, Mr. Sulu. I will ... manage the necessary instrumentation."

Too weak to reply, Sulu got shakily to his feet and started for the elevator. The doors slid apart before he could reach the switch.

Kirk stood there, swaying slightly, but apparently alert and in control of himself. Every step as he moved forward was painful, every shift of an eye felt like the blow of a hammer on his orbicular nerves.

"Spock..." he succeeded in whispering.

The first officer whirled, showing as close to an expression of alarm as he was capable of. "Captain, how...? In your condition, it shouldn't be -"

"Stimulants," Kirk muttered. "Pumped full ... temporary ..." Spock was at his side, helping him to his command chair. Kirk brushed aside his objections. "Have to find an antidote ... fast. Only one man ... maybe. McCoy."

"Captain," Spock countered gently, "the entire medical staff of an advanced world like Draymia could not find an answer to this plague in many years of research."

"We don't know that they applied themselves directly to the problem, Spock. Demos told us how fearful of contamination their observer teams were." His expression twisted. "Whereas Bones always liked to get right into a problem.

"I'd guess the Draymians' quarantine extended to medical personnel too, as soon as they found the plague was one hundred percent fatal. Maybe a few physicians sacrificed themselves trying to find an answer. At the beginning. But even then, they didn't have the advantage of a Federation medical library computer, or a researcher with Bones' skill and experience in dealing with rare diseases.

"We've got to get him back here ... back here..."

"The Draymians will not permit..." Spock started to say. He stopped.

Kirk had lapsed into semiconsciousness.

Spock sat thoughtfully, weighing this possibility against that solution, juxtaposing alternatives with probabilities, before eventually making his way to Uhura's vacated communications station.

"Draymia Port," the visage that appeared on the main screen announced.

"This is the Federation starship *Enterprise*, First Officer Spock. I must speak *immediately* with the Supreme Prefect."

"We know of your power and capabilities, Officer Spock," the figure at the other end said, "but do you think that the Supreme Prefect is a personage who can be called up at every -"

"If I do not speak with the Supreme Prefect instantly," Spock informed the other, "I predict with ninety-seven point eight percent surety the advancement of your status in a backward direction. This matter concerns the Dramia II plague."

Bulging eyes rolled and the communicator began shouting off-screen demands, as the Draymian worked his hands in a series of furious gestures.

The screen flickered. For a moment abstract electronic images danced across the face, then the static cleared and the face of the Supreme Prefect hastily appeared. He was wrestling with his tunic and his dignity as the focus sharpened.

"Mr. Spock, what is the meaning of this? What is this about the plague - and why do you speak and not your captain?"

"Captain Kirk and the majority of the ship's complement are presently incapacitated," Spock answered smoothly. "The Dramia II plague has struck the ship."

"Plague aboard." The Prefect assumed a look of panic. "Surely, Mr. Spock, you must not -"

"The plague will not be brought to the surface. I am not here to threaten, but to seek help. In the event no antidote for the plague is found, the *Enterprise* will destroy itself before the next ship-day is over."

The Prefect had been absorbing all this stolidly. Now he suddenly looked suspicious as Spock continued.

"Commander Demos will be killed with the rest of us. I regret this. There is only one way to save him and to save the survivor we found on Dramia II, who can attest to the innocence of your prisoner. A great many lives and truths are at stake here, and only one man can find the solution to them all: Dr. McCoy. You must release him immediately. Temporarily, if you will - but no one else has the skill to find a possible antidote in the time that remains."

The Prefect considered for long seconds - understandable, in light of the barrage of information Spock had just thrown at him. His decision was obviously agonized, but firm.

"I cannot," he announced finally.

"The survivor, Kolti, is a witness for Dr. McCoy. He can testify for him. There are many others, of different races, on board the *Enterprise* who will die if he is not released. We may all die anyway, Dr. McCoy among us. If you have so little confidence in his medical ability, at least release him to die of the plague with his friends."

"You argue plausibly, Vulcan, but without facts."

"You must trust me. I have no other assurances to give."

The Prefect seemed to be a reasonable being. If Spock was interpreting the alien expression correctly, the Draymian leader was going through some tortuous mental gymnastics.

His expression turned crafty. "There is another who might persuade me. Let this witness, this claimed survivor, speak."

"Impossible. He, too, is seriously stricken."

Frustration all too suddenly replaced deliberation at the other end of the transmission. "Demos cannot speak, the witness cannot speak, even Captain Kirk cannot speak - yet you wish us to release the accused McCoy. On faith. Do you think you can secure the freedom of such a criminal so simply? Did you not think I would see through your desperate ploy?"

The screen went blank.

"McCoy," Kirk mumbled from behind Spock. "Got to get McCoy."

The first officer tried to re-establish the contact, but this time the ground station on Draymia refused to acknowledge his signals. He finally stopped trying, turned and walked over to Kirk.

"Captain, are you...?"

"One minute I'm fine, the next I can taste oblivion - it's the stimulants, Mr. Spock. Uneven effect on the system, guesswork dosage ... my body will pay for it in the end, I suppose. What about...?"

Spock shook his head. "The Draymians refuse to release him. Unfortunately, they have no reason to trust us. They have a right to be cautious, but at the same time they are not reacting logically in this."

"No, Spock," Kirk breathed heavily, "they're reacting emotionally. I'm sorry so much of the universe turns out to be more unreasonable than Vulcan."

"It *is* distressing at times," Spock admitted, missing Kirk's sarcasm entirely. "But if you'll grant me the freedom to improvise in the face of adversity, I believe I can secure Dr. McCoy's release anyway."

Kirk stared painfully up at him. "That would mean contravening the official warrant, Mr. Spock."

"Only the letter, Captain. Dr. McCoy could be returned to stand trial afterward. I hardly need point out this is a desperation measure I am proposing. We will borrow Dr. McCoy for a little while. If we die, I do not think he will care what the Draymians do to him anyway."

"You're sure you can pull this off, Spock?"

"I intend to -"

"No, don't tell me." Kirk didn't have to think. He put his palms on the arm of the chair and shoved. Spock hurried to get a supportive arm under one shoulder.

"I think I can handle the transporter for you, Spock..."

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"Be careful, Captain," the first officer admonished. They had staggered down to the transporter room. Spock waited within the alcove while Kirk adjusted the settings. "I would dislike materializing several kilometers above the streets of the capital city."

Kirk nodded, managed a grin, and engaged the instrumentation. There was something on his fevered mind, something else he had to ask Spock...

He hadn't thought of it by the time the first officer was gone.

It was dark where Spock rematerialized on the street parallel to the justice building. Dark and late.

He still felt exposed, but fortunately there appeared to be no strolling Draymians about to observe his arrival. Not that the average Draymian would pay much attention to him.

Unless, he mused distastefully, the Draymians had better control of their emotions than their leaders had displayed thus far, the word of McCoy's arrest must have been kept secret. Otherwise a mob surely would have overrun the building by now. Hence he could expect to be regarded by the average citizen with curiosity rather than animosity.

This time he would turn the government's secrecy to his own advantage.

There were definite benefits in being smaller than the local inhabitants. It enabled Spock to make his way skillfully through the labyrinth of corridors in the building, dodging the night staff. The latter were too engrossed in their own drudgery to peer hard at places where Draymians would not fit.

But the two guards standing watch outside the chamber housing McCoy's force-cell were a different lot. They appeared fit, alert, and fully capable of rapid employment of the primitive but lethal-looking apparatus strapped at their waists.

For a moment Spock hesitated uncertainly, wondering at the presence of only two guards for so great a suspected criminal as McCoy. Then he realized that the doctor had been handed over freely. The Draymians had no reason to suppose the *Enterprise* would relinquish him only to take him back suddenly.

Hence the reason for Spock's haste - for if the Prefect had a little time to reflect on his recent conversation with him....

Of one thing he was sure - this was not the time to debate the ethics of the situation with McCoy's guards. Such individuals were rarely selected for their receptiveness to logical persuasion or, for that matter, to original thought. He did not think they would react politely if he announced his intentions.

He slid a stylus from his waist, tossed it across the corridor. It clattered loudly in the quiet. Both guards were immediately alert. Hands on side-arms, they moved to investigate the source of the noise.

An unexpected bonus - Spock hadn't expected both of them leave their station. The unbarred portal to McCoy lay open.

But the guards hadn't looked incompetent. Therefore, they weren't. Therefore, there was something unseen here to be wary of. Slipping noiselessly across the hallway and into the

chamber beyond, he quickly discovered what. A quick block knocked the hand weapon from the third guard waiting at the far wall. But a pillarlike arm closed around Spock's waist, lifting him high, squeezing, impairing his breathing.

With no time to experiment on an intractable subject, Spock reached around and back as massive arm muscles tightened. Finding the spot he wanted, he moved his fingers a certain way...

The guard collapsed with satisfying speed. When he crumpled to the parquet floor, the sound was loud enough to awaken the drowsing McCoy.

He rolled over on his bunk and stared. As soon as he recognized Spock he was on his feet and over by the inner wall of the cell.

"Spock - what in the world -"

Spock ignored the questions as he glanced back at the open doorway. Apparently the two guards outside were still searching for the source of the clattering. The little control box slid clear of the guard's hip. Spock studied it, touched the remembered sequence of switches.

"Input later, Doctor - no time now. And keep your voice down."

The first glowing nimbus that enclosed McCoy vanished. Another touch and the inner force-field disappeared. McCoy was trying to talk and awaken at the same time. The resulting combination of questions and accusations was understandably garbled.

"Have you and Jim gone out of your minds, Spock?" he finished confusedly. "Why - this is a jail break."

"If you'll just step out of the force-field area and come with me, Doctor..."

McCoy took a step - backward. "Spock, I can't. It's illegal. You saw the warrant. I've got to stand trial. I want to stand trial."

His face was agonized. "I have to find out if -"

"You will stand trial and you will find out, Doctor," Spock insisted, impatiently looking from the recalcitrant physician to the still vacant doorway. "After you've found an antidote for the plague which is about to kill everyone aboard the *Enterprise*."

McCoy started. "Plague...?"

"We found a survivor, too, on Dramia II. A potential witness in your behalf. I do not know whether the disease lay dormant in him until he came aboard, or what. That is what you must discover. Humans are as susceptible to the disease as Draymians. Nearly everyone aboard is seriously ill."

"Spock - you don't tell me the important things first."

"You never ask me the important things first, Doctor."

McCoy moved quickly clear of the force-field boundary, outside the final bar to the ship's transporter beam.

"You realize, Doctor, the Draymians could still acquit you. But if you return aboard, you will be exposed to the disease. You could die, too."

Fully awake now, McCoy brushed hair from his eyes and glanced at him. "I'm aware of that - who's the doctor here? What surprises me is that you'd even think of mentioning it."

"I apologize, Doctor, but," Spock stared at the door, "I have been operating under stress lately." Out came the communicator. "We are clear of the force cell, Captain, beam us aboard."

A startled, angry voice sounded. Not from the communicator but from the doorway. The other two guards had returned. It took barely a second for them to take in the new alien, the fact that the prisoner stood alongside him instead of behind a glowing shield, and their unconscious companion of the floor.

A pair of tiny, explosive shells passed right through the place where McCoy and Spock had stood second-fractions before. They made a mess of the far wall.

IV

McCoy was mentally reviewing everything they knew about the Dramia II plague even as reintegration was being completed in the transporter alcove aboard ship. Scientific speculation vanished as soon as he saw Kirk, his skin now turned a bilious green, slumped over the transporter console.

"Jim!"

Kirk looked up, grinned weakly. "Hello, Bones. Welcome back." He collapsed before McCoy could set foot outside the alcove.

Kneeling next to Kirk, McCoy rolled him over and studied the weakened form as if the cause of the plague might suddenly advertise itself visibly - a movement under the skin, or glowing germs spelling out the formula for an effective serum.

Kirk only lay there.

"Help me get him to Sick Bay, Spock."

Together they wrestled the captain down to McCoy's lab, placed him alongside the other two who had first been stricken - Kolti and Demos.

The two Draymians and one human lay with a ghastly motionlessness. This was a quiet, efficient disease. There were no flailing arms, no hysterical gasps for air, no hallucinations and no screams of pain - Only the peculiarly horrible pigmentation change ... to be followed by death.

Occasionally Kirk, still under the waning influence of the stimulant overdose, would awaken and mutter something half-coherent. McCoy didn't waste time listening to him.

Instead, he studied his friend as dispassionately as possible. Only by removing himself to a peak of empirical distraction would his mind stay clear enough to hunt for a solution.

He was aware that he had already been massively exposed to infection. Right up until the onset of the disease he should feel fine. First his ability to work and then his life would go in rapid succession.

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It shouldn't be so hard. He should have been able to find a solution. But he hadn't. Couldn't.

McCoy pounded on the console of the medical computer as if it were personally responsible for the steadily approaching disaster. Every time he seemed to be coming close, the white letters, the same damning white letters, would suddenly flash on the annex screen...

NO CROSS-CORRELATION - PROPOSAL INEFFECTIVE

...and he'd have to start all over again. Doctor? Who said he was a doctor? He had fooled everyone long enough.

Bitterly, he mused that if the Draymians had been right all along, he was going to be executed by the plague he'd initiated. Not that he minded being subjected to such impersonal justice.

But he minded very much that all his friends might be taken along with him - victims of a more mature incompetence.

He looked over to where Spock was sitting. Calm, seemingly relaxed, the first officer studied another annex linked to the medical computer. They wouldn't find an antidote in there - of that McCoy had grown certain. But it probably helped relieve Spock's feeling of helplessness.

Besides, there was always the miniscule chance there might be *something* in the records that could lead to a hint of the relative of a clue.

Give him one straw...

"Anything at all, Spock?"

"Negative, Doctor."

McCoy studied his own readout, rubbed at his forehead. "The problem is that these violent pigmentation shifts don't link up with any known, or even with any rumored disease."

Doesn't link up, doesn't add up, no correlation, no correlation - but the pigmentation changes were the major symptom, weren't they? Well, weren't they?

Idly, he voiced a peripheral thought. "Spock, we know Vulcans are immune to this plague. That doesn't mean they couldn't be carriers."

"No, Doctor. It does not."

"Yet you still beamed down after me."

Spock didn't look up from his annex screen. "Given the Draymian's intransigence where your release was concerned, I felt justified in taking a calculated risk."

McCoy, then, was not the only one in this room whose conscience had reason to burn.

Something basic was wrong with their approach. Surely the Draymians had already exhausted this line of research. A first-year medical student, now, with a mind unencumbered by years of precedent, might have seen a solution instantly. But he, with a lifetime of statistics and experience crammed into his cranium, could not see through the muck of acquired knowledge. Was he even capable of having an original idea anymore?

Where was the freshness of youth when it was so desperately required?

He looked again at Demos, Kolti, Kirk. Their color had shifted to pink. Soon it would be bright red and then it wouldn't matter what brilliant insights, what revelations he would be privileged to glimpse.

"Work harder, Spock. They're entering the terminal stage."

"A useless admonition, Doctor."

It was. Spock was already driving himself as hard as he could. If he displayed no sign of it, it was because not an iota of energy was wasted in visible muscle tension or in nervous breathing.

McCoy even tried a tight-beam transmission in hopes of contacting Alco III, the nearest Federation world with advanced medical facilities. That failed him, too.

"Spock ... Spock!" he yelled, trying to break the first officer from his transfixed study of the computer annex. "I'm trying to get through to Alco. Maybe it's too far, but...," he squinted at the viewscreen, "I shouldn't be getting the kind of scrambled readings I am."

Spock looked over at him, spoke with doleful assurance. "That is hardly surprising, Doctor. Undoubtedly one of the numerous auroral disturbances is now placed between Draymia and Alco. Even a tight beam could not penetrate such a vast disturbance."

He was on his own. He had lost precious minutes hoping for the aid of a distant angel. McCoy finally shut off the annex and simply sat back, to think. Behind him, Kirk was mumbling. He had overheard their last conversation and even his subconscious was attuned to the beauties of the universe he loved so well.

"Local phenomenon ... auroral excitation, lovely, lovely ... change colors, shift hues, magnificent...

"Aesculapius!" McCoy yelled.

"No need to shout, Doctor," Spock said imperturbably. "You have found something?"

"The auroras..."

"Are a dead-end, Doctor. They are of a peculiar nature, but radiation levels are far from lethal - far from being even slightly dangerous."

McCoy rose from his seat and stretched. "One day, Spock, I'll sit down and correlate the relationship of the auroral radiation to its effect on the melanin in human - and Draymian - skin. But not now."

Spock looked thoughtful for a long minute, then became almost excited. "The pigmentation changes are *not* a symptom of the disease. They are a separate effect caused by the auroral radiation."

McCoy nodded vigorously. "Feed the same data we've been using into the med computer, *without* making any mention of epidermal tone shift. See if we get a result this time."

Spock didn't hesitate. Changing the input program required only a minute. There was a brief pause ... and then words and figures started pouring back at them.

"Fast," was all McCoy said.

"I believe this is what you need, Doctor," Spock observed, studying the steadily maturing formula.

McCoy sat down, realized he was shaking slightly. "The color change in the skin had nothing whatsoever to do with the plague. We reported them as a symptom ... no wonder the computer couldn't correlate it with the rest of our information.

"It's giving us an antidote ... and as to the cause of the disease," he sighed, "it's the aurora, too."

"But, Doctor," Spock began uncertainly, "you just said it was a separate effect."

"It is, but the radiation is also the key to the plague. It just doesn't have any link with the color changes. There must be a virus, a bacterium, which is stimulated by the auroral radiation. Naturally, since the aurora is stimulating both, it would appear the color shift is a result of the disease - when in fact, they have no medical connection." He paused.

"Nineteen years ago Dramia II must have been passing through another of the strong auroral belts. I can't be sure ...

I wasn't in astronomy. But I'll bet a check of the expedition's records will confirm it. I do seem to remember a colorful night sky, though. I was too busy to admire local color most of the time." His voice dropped.

"Death's rainbow - it brought on the original plague, just as this aurora has brought it on again. We weren't affected until a carrier of the dormant microbe - Kolti - was brought aboard. I think a check of old records on Draymia itself might show legends of people changing color ... and returning to normal when the auroras passed on."

His voice dropped to a whisper. Spock didn't press for clarification - the relief that had appeared in McCoy's voice was a private thing, not to be interrupted or shared. It was a relief that could not be judged on any general human scale ... only on the personal one of Dr. Leonard McCoy.

"I had nothing to do with the plague, then." He blinked and walked over to stand behind Spock, peering over his shoulder at the screen.

"There's our virus, just as you suspected, Doctor." Spock worked the instrumentation and a new flow of information appeared. "And there is the declaration I most feared."

Under the microphoto of the virus itself had appeared the words, "NO KNOWN ANTIDOTE."

Spock tried to keep his voice as comforting as possible. "I suspected that if there were a cure, the Draymians would have found it. With nineteen years in which to research, even theoretically, they must have hit upon the same aurora-plague connection we've just reached."

"Every disease caused by a living agent has an antidote, Spock. Every..." He stopped, his voice sharpening. "*Think*, Spock."

"I have been, Doctor. It took me a moment to make the ... correlation. Do you remember our witness ... Kolti? You treated him nineteen years ago for saurian virus."

"The individual ... there were so many. Maybe ... yes, I think I do. It was a strange case to find on Dramia II. As I recall, he was one of their off-world representatives. Contracted it from someone in the Federation. Sure, I remember him now! We had a helluva time digging out the right serum for that ... we'd expected to have to treat only local infections. Wait a minute." McCoy's face lit up like one of engineer Scott's control reactors.

"You say *he's* the witness, the survivor you found?"

"Correct, Doctor. He survived the plague and all aftereffects. Apparently, however, inoculation against saurian virus does not last nineteen years."

"No. No, it doesn't. He needs a booster. In fact, everyone on board ought to have a similar injection. If the key is saurian antibodies, recovery from the plague after administration should be as rapid as debilitation was."

"Let us hope so, Doctor," Spock remarked with a glance at the nearby beds. Kolti, Kirk and Demos were beginning to turn a dark crimson. "We have very little time."

McCoy was already moving toward the refrigerated locker where preprepared serums were stored.

"I'd like to run some tests on this first, Spock, but as you say, we haven't time." He grimaced. "Any side effects can't be worse than death."

"A queerly logical statement, Doctor." Spock understood the principles of irony.

McCoy hurriedly filled a mass injector, then a second, with three-quarters of the available serum. Then he programmed the organic fabrication computer to prepare the necessary remainder. It would be ready long before he and Spock had finished applying the first doses.

The infirmary was soon filled with hisses from the hypo sprays as they moved from bed to bed, pallet to cot, administering the antidote. Nor had McCoy neglected himself - if for some

reason the serum proved ineffective, he wanted to be the first to know.

There was a buzz from the intercom set next to the computer keyboard. McCoy looked up uncertainly. "I thought you said everyone else aboard was incapacitated, Spock."

"They are, Doctor," he replied, heading for the *acknowledge* switch, "but the main computer itself is also immune to the plague."

McCoy muttered something about "Vulcans and machines" which Spock didn't hear and continued inoculating the prone crew members scattered through the room. Spock returned a moment later.

"You will be interested to know, Doctor, that we are leaving the last streamer of the aurora which caused this trouble and blocked your communications attempt. Also, I ran a check on the composition of Draymian and Dramian atmospheres. I don't think we'll unearth any historical records of mass color changes on Draymia. The composition differs slightly but significantly ... enough to block out the melanin-affecting radiation of the auroras."

McCoy moved to the next body. "So Draymia's always been plague-immune. No wonder the outburst on Dramia II terrified them so. They'd no experience with even the color shifts."

He made the inoculation, noticed that the indicator light on the side of the sprayer had come on.

"Empty ... the synthesizer should be finished with the big batch I ordered up. Be right back, Spock." The first officer nodded, continued work with his own spray as McCoy started back toward the far end of the infirmary and the medical lab.

On the way he saw that Kirk, Demos and Kolti were running the color change backward. Red, to pink, then green and blue and finally their normal healthy color again. The speed of the change was fast enough to be visible to the naked eye - hopefully physical recovery would be equally rapid.

It was. When McCoy returned with a second empty hypo, Kirk had already opened his eyes. Seconds later Kolti and Demos followed suit. Nearby, a transporter specialist was snuffling like a pig in clover as he, too, started to come around.

Kirk looked at the ceiling, then rolled his head sideways. He looked tired, but had already regained enough strength to smile and nod at McCoy.

A strange disease - he would spend considerable time analyzing it. Studying with rather more detachment than he had been permitted up to now.

It would make a paper suitable for submission to the *Starfleet Medical Journal* - was that a tear at the corner of one eye? He wiped it away before any of his patients could notice - too much close work in too brief a time, that was all.

"You did it, Bones," Kirk mumbled softly.

"Again." McCoy looked up, past the stirring form of Kirk, to see a tall Draymian he didn't recognize staring back at him. The alien wore a look which even a child could have read as undisguised admiration.

He turned away, embarrassed by both the unabashed adulation and the fact that for the life of him he couldn't place the face of this survivor. But then, there had been so many Draymians those long days years ago. But undoubtedly this Kolti had seen very few humans, so it was natural that he should remember the doctor.

Nevertheless, he walked over to the stranger and exchanged hand clasps and Draymian embrace with him. The patient's crushing affection was an excellent sign his body was rapidly returning to normal.

Kirk was sitting up on the edge of his bed, exercising his neck with circling twists of his head.

"How do you feel, Jim?"

"Like I've been asleep for ten thousand years, Bones, and in all that time no one bothered to dust me."

"Dr. McCoy?" He turned and saw that the Commander of Draymian security was also sitting up, a mite awkwardly, on his undersized bed. "We are a technologically advanced race, Dr. McCoy. We had thought that in a few things, such as interstellar travel and contact, we are still in our infancy. It seems that we are still in our infancy in less scientific ways as well."

He extended a huge hand. "Will you accept the sincere apologies of a misguided child who knew no better and had only his civilization's best interests at heart? The malice lies in our memory of events, not in our hearts."

McCoy shook the proffered hand firmly, then moved on - he still had work to do.

"Doctor," Spock called, from where he was administering the serum, "are you certain that you are all right?"

McCoy wiped moisture from his eyes. "Doesn't anyone understand basic physiology around here!" he snarled. "I'm working hard and under stress, that's all."

Spock linked the phrase with the tone of McCoy's voice and his hypothetical mental state - and understood. Of course, he saw no reason to smile.

***

If the Draymians had been careful at first to conceal their enmity, they showed unbridled enthusiasm when making amends. There were times during the following days when McCoy thought he would have to run and hide lest he be smothered by constant accolades. The Draymian people outdid themselves in their gratitude.

The only difficulties arose when he was forced time and again to refuse actual gifts, explaining that regulations forbade accepting any kind of gratuity, however indirect, for services

rendered in the line of duty. Their good health, he told them, was reward enough.

When the last medal had been awarded, the last speech read, the final hyperbolic hyperbole driven home, they found themselves outside the justice building once again, high above the bustling streets and boulevards of the capital of Draymia.

Kirk and Spock were there with McCoy, all three resplendent in full dress uniform. The Prefect was there, and Demos, of course. And a third Draymian - Kolti, now toweringly splendid in the blue and puce of Draymian Deep Space Service, Diplomatic Section.

They were going to see a lot more of that well-cut uniform in the future, Kirk surmised quietly - especially if Kolti was an indication of the kind of people being trained to fill it.

"...and so we of Draymia wish to thank you once more, Dr. McCoy," the Prefect was concluding, "for the discovery of the antidote which frees future colonies from destruction by the auroral plague."

"Thank Mr. Spock and Captain Kirk, not me," McCoy told him. He managed not to blush - he had already blushed himself out, these past few days. At least, he thought he had, until the Prefect suddenly produced an intimidating scroll from out of nowhere.

"And now," the alien official began, "it is my pleasure to relate some fitting personal sentiments on commemoration of -"

"Please, your Prefectship," McCoy broke in tiredly. "Somehow I have the feeling I've heard these sentiments before. Couldn't I - please - beg off? I'd really like to get back to the ship."

"We must apologize," Demos said, coming to McCoy's rescue by placing a restraining yet gentle hand on the disappointed Prefect's arm. There was no telling how long the security chief had worked on his *own* as yet concealed speech. "But as great a genius as Dr. McCoy is," he continued, "he has not yet discovered an antidote for boredom."

Kirk and the Prefect laughed, while Spock looked normally phlegmatic.

"I'm afraid," McCoy sallied in reply, "that while that's a disease rampant throughout the Galaxy, it's barely been touched upon."

The Prefect made the Draymian equivalent of a resigned sigh and folded up his lengthy scroll. "Very well, then ... go in peace and health, Dr. McCoy - the health you have given to future settlers. We will see you again some day, I hope."

"I have a hunch Federation vessels will be calling at Draymia with increasing frequency, sir," Kirk predicted. "I wouldn't be surprised if we were assigned another stop here. We'll be looking forward to it."

"It is well, then," the Prefect concluded, satisfied.

Embraces were exchanged all around. Then the three officers stepped back toward the ornamental railing.

"Beam us aboard, Mr. Scott."

"Aye, Captain," came the chief engineer's happy acknowledgment back over the communicator.

***

"I don't know about you, gentlemen," Kirk said as the elevator carried them toward the Bridge, "but I'm ready to get back to Alco Starbase."

"And I," McCoy informed them fervently, "am about ready to get back to the normal, daily routine of passing out pink pills and examining sore throats!"

"I would hope such exotic efforts," Spock began as the doors slid apart and they entered the Bridge, "would include resumption of the normal, daily dispensing of the regular vitamin rations to the crew, in proper proportions according to their biological requirements."

McCoy hesitated just inside the portal. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, you have been somewhat derelict in your duties of late, Doctor."

McCoy gaped at him. "Derelict in my duties? I've been held in solitary confinement on an alien world, accused of mass murder, and forced to find an antidote for a previously incurable plague in an incredibly short period of time - with only your help, I might add - and you can say I've been derelict in my duties?"

"Hippocrates," Spock replied calmly, "would not have approved of attempts at finding lame excuses, Doctor." He called the elevator and stepped inside, leaving Kirk and a flabbergasted McCoy alone by the doorway.

McCoy proceeded to make several unidentifiable mouth noises, none with complimentary overtones, which seemed to relate vaguely to Spock's ancestry.

"Calm down, Bones," Kirk finally told him, working hard to stifle a smile. "You know Spock - he's just trying to get your goat."

"Goat," McCoy sputtered, "I'll give him my goat ... with anthrax, yet!" There was a wild look coming into his eyes. "Jim, do you think Vulcans are subject to anthrax? Do you think they're vulnerable to -"

Kirk couldn't contain himself any longer. He broke out laughing, was joined by Uhura, Sulu, and the high, amused piping of Arex. McCoy glanced around the room, immediately saw he would get no sympathy from this bunch.

He finally got hold of his emotions. "Jim, if I'm ever in jail again, don't send a Vulcan to release me. If you do, you'll have to send someone else to drag him out. You'll have to!"

He became silent then, and the wild look was replaced with a smile of uncommonly fiendish glee. It sobered Kirk.

"Bones," he asked worriedly, "what are you conjuring?"

"Vitamin supplements," McCoy was muttering. He sounded almost cheerful, "Yes, vitamin supplements." He looked up. "Excuse me, everybody ... I have some work to do ... some supplements to prepare. I've been derelict in my daily duties."

Kirk could hear him singing something about vitamin supplements until the turbolift carried him out of range.

HOW SHARPER THAN A SERPENT'S TOOTH

(Adapted from a script by Russell Bates and David Wise)

I

The network of detector drones and interwoven patrols which guarded the Federation home worlds, its industrial and population centers, was as thorough and as efficient as that highly advanced multiracial civilization could make it. It was designed to protect and defend against even a surprise Klingon attack in force.

A single ship, moving at high speed and employing radical evasive maneuvers, could conceivably penetrate that electronic web. The one which did so moved in a predictable, straight path and made no attempt to disguise its destination. It compensated for the lack of concealment by moving at a speed previously thought impossible.

No one could be sure, but the probe executed such extreme changes of direction at such incredible velocities that it seemed certain it was uninhabited. Also, it went about its business with supreme indifference to all attempts at contact. When all such methods were exhausted, and the probe continued to refuse repeated warnings to steer clear of Federation worlds, the Federation council reluctantly decided to destroy the interloper. This decision was modified by the science councilor to include some initial attempt to capture the craft. The Federation engineering division desired at least a look at those remarkable engines.

The attempt at capture met with the same result as those at destruction, however. No Federation warship could overtake it, and the alien interloper did not linger in the vicinity of any armed vessel it approached. So in spite of intensive efforts to halt it, the probe performed the most rapid survey of the

United Federation Systems in history ... and it did so with a silence that was an unnerving as it was baffling.

All the while, however, the Federation's most advanced electronic predictors were slowly analyzing the drone's performance. Continued observation showed that it held to a prescribed pattern of survey and dodge, inspection and flight.

At each new world, larger and stronger Federation forces closed in on the craft. Each was programmed with a particular attack pattern, which was backed by a third set of reinforcements that would stand by in case the probe escaped the first two. Soon entire fleets had been mobilized in a mounting attempt to corner a single, uninhabited, as yet inoffensive ship.

The problem was that the probe never lingered long enough for the huge forces to catch up with it. Nonetheless, the Vulcan logicians programming the predictors were certain that given enough time, they would trap the drone in a maze of phasers and torpedoes so intense that nothing could escape. But they weren't given the required time. The probe executed its final survey - a brief, yet impressively thorough multiple circuit of Earth itself.

Even as the most powerful Federation force so far was weaving its way toward the probe, it paused in free space and aligned itself toward a predetermined point. It appeared to be blithely unconcerned with the increasing possibility of annihilation. Once positioned, the probe discharged an extremely high-frequency, lengthy blast of energy. The thunderous broadcast utilized far more power than it seemed a ship of that modest size could muster.

The broadcast lasted only a few minutes. At its conclusion, the probe activated its engines. It disintegrated just outside the orbit of Luna in an explosion of sobering magnitude. Auroras formed as far south as Hong Kong and Istanbul for several weeks, and most of the transmitting equipment on Earth's lone satellite required extensive repair immediately thereafter.

The mysterious intruder was gone. Several fragments of eyelash-size metal gave no clue to its origin. It had carried out its lengthy mission for the incomprehensible motives of as yet unknown beings.

From where had it come? Who had constructed such a marvelous machine and what were their intentions? Why had it shunned all contact with Federation intelligences? These obvious questions and more were asked again and again by important individuals serving in the highest echelons of Federation government. And those whom they asked for the answers could only shrug.

A measure of the importance attached to the enigmatic visitation was the readiness with which the Klingons and Romulans cooperated. The wonder at this vanished when both opponents of the Federation sheepishly admitted that before the Federation had been surveyed, their own respective empires had been similarly inspected. Though no one could be certain, it appeared that the same isolated probe had been involved in each instance.

A few zealots within the government warned that it might all be an elaborate plot, concocted by the Klingons and/or Romulans to obtain military information from frightened government authorities.

Impartial engineering experts quashed such thoughts immediately ... neither Klingon or adaptive Romulan physics were even close to producing something as advanced as their visitor had been. If they were, it was ruthlessly pointed out, they would be putting it to more effective use than casual surveillance.

The intricate recording equipment based on Luna, on Earth and on Titan could track even the path of a butterfly at interstellar distances. So when the suicidal probe began regurgitating its concentrated information, those several stations were already tracking it. They detected the transmission the instant it began, recorded it minutely for rechecking at later leisure.

So efficient was that tracking equipment, however, that no rechecks were required, no computer enhancement of that blindingly powerful signal necessary. Instantaneous triangulation was produced by the three stations.

The beam had erupted from the probe along a line as clear and precise as white ink on a blackboard. It was along that path that the *Enterprise* had been ordered to proceed.

The amount of energy expended in that minutes-long broadcast had been immense - far in excess of anything Federation science was capable of. And although that energy was still on the near side of infinite, there was reason enough to believe that the receiving end of the transmission might lie outside this galaxy...

If that were the case, Kirk thought to himself, the *Enterprise* could have rather a longer trip than anyone expected. No one had anticipated what the orders might be if she found herself poised on the rim of such extremes.

But Kirk had to consider that the beam had intercepted no known star systems, not even suns without planets, and they were now well outside Federation boundaries. He idly watched Spock at work with the library computer and sighed. They had been retracing the course Starfleet had supplied for weeks now.

No telling how long this could go on. The orders had been for the *Enterprise* to proceed until, as the ethereally worded document stated: "all possible doubt has been removed as to the potential dangers posed to the Federated peoples by the alien intruder."

That order was sufficiently vague to keep them cruising for months, even years, unless recalled - or until the halfway point of their irreplaceable supplies was reached.

Lately Kirk had been subject to a particularly chilling nightmare. Some junior clerk at Starfleet headquarters was continually misplacing the *Enterprise* file, or allowing the recall orders to slip down behind some spool storage case, or

accidentally erasing all record of the cruiser from the Starfleet central computer.

The ship was forgotten. It continued on, taking on new stores at various puzzled worlds, whose inhabitants stared sadly at the wrinkled, white-haired crew trapped in its Tantalus-like quest.

He grew aware of a presence next to him. The presence was clearing its throat delicately. "What...? Oh..."

Turning away from the patient yeoman, Kirk studied the order form the latter had handed to him. Hmmm ... standard request for use of the main recreation room.

For a second he almost handed it back unsigned, remembering what had nearly happened to McCoy, Sulu and Uhura in that same room several weeks ago. But the story of their entrapment in that chamber had circulated throughout the ship. A scare like that would die hard. He doubted anyone would go in for any exotic manipulations of the environment for a while. It was one thing to be threatened on a new, alien world - quite another when your own games facilities turned on you.

Someone wanted the proper atmosphere for a birthday party of some such, no doubt. He signed the chit, saluted casually as the yeoman departed, and turned his gaze to the view forward.

The screen displayed the same gloriously monotonous image it had for days and days - unfamiliar star patterns speckling the blackness. Kirk found himself growing sick of unfamiliar star patterns speckling the blackness. If they didn't encounter something soon - a derelict spacecraft, a postal drop, anything - he was going to have Uhura tight-beam the nearest starbase and patch him through to fleet headquarters, where he could give vent to his emotions.

He began running his speech over in his head. He would discourse on the futility of the entire expedition and add some appropriate thoughts about the power wielded by a few

panicked bureaucrats. Above all, this expedition was proving to be a sinful waste of ship's power and crewpower.

He forced himself to clear the welling irritation from his voice as he called for the current status report from his first officer.

Spock paused an instant at the gooseneck viewer, checked another sensor before turning to face Kirk. "We are continuing along the path plotted by Starfleet Central, Captain. However, I feel it is time for me to point out that the accuracy of that plotting diffuses with every parsec we cover.

"It has now reached the point where...," he hesitated long enough to check a last readout, "...the margin of divergence has increased to nearly a tenth of a degree."

Kirk nodded. "I see. Not a serious range of error ... if we're hunting for a planet. But if we're looking for a ship, we could miss it by many trillions of kilometers. Soon that'll be true for a star system, too.

"What would you recommend, Mr. Spock?"

"Reducing our speed to accommodate our long-range, peripheral sensing equipment, so that we do not rush past anything such as a small vessel."

"Reasonable - though I don't like the idea of cutting our speed. Mr. Walking Bear, bring us down to warp-factor two."

The ensign who was occupying Sulu's position usually drew the third shift - when both Kirk and Spock were off-duty and asleep. Sulu, however, had elected to take some extra time off that he had accumulated, and Walking Bear had gladly volunteered for the opportunity to serve with the ship's executive command.

He had performed well so far, Kirk mused. Must remember to make note of the ensign's competence in the supplementary log. Unaware that he was being subjected to close scrutiny, Walking Bear made the necessary adjustments. "Aye, sir, warp-factor two."

His accent was faint, but the long black hair and rich rust color marked him as an Amerind of the North American Southwest. Kirk struggled to recall an early academy seminar in Basic Ethnics.

It was impossible to be more than cursorily familiar with the background of every one of the *Enterprise*'s four hundred thirty assigned personnel. That didn't stop the captain from trying, however. It was something with a hard *ch* sound in it, now...

Kirk wondered how much time the ensign had in ... perhaps he was eligible for promotion to lieutenant. Even though this expedition had proven routine, maybe he could come up with some way to test the young helmsman's mettle.

As it developed, he would be spared the trouble...

"Captain," Arex reported, "sensors have picked up a vessel at extreme range."

"Any indication as to heading, Mr. Arex?"

The navigation officer studied his readouts a moment longer, made a high, snuffling sound as he expelled air through high-ridged nostrils.

"It appears to be proceeding on the same plot followed by the alien probe's final broadcast, sir - but the vessel is moving toward us, instead of outward. Approximate speed, warp-three."

"Mr. Spock?"

"Range is still too extreme to attempt detailed observation, Captain." He studied his small viewers. "Possibly this is a second probe. It may be that the first did not complete its assigned task, and merely malfunctioned instead of self-destructing. This may be another drone coming to conclude the operation."

Kirk frowned. "True, Mr. Spock, or it could be the original probe's owner."

"If this one's coming in search of its predecessor, it's not going to find much," Uhura noted.

"Order all stations, yellow alert, Lieutenant," Kirk ordered. "Open standard hailing frequencies." He gestured at the main viewscreen. Despite maximum magnification, the scanners still showed only awesome darkness, strange suns and feathery nebulae.

Whatever it was, maybe it would prove a little more talkative than its super-fast ancestor - if indeed the two craft possessed any relationship at all. They might merely be racing to meet another deep-space explorer like themselves.

The alarm blared throughout the *Enterprise*, sending a second shift scurrying to join the one already on duty.

Kirk stared expectantly at the screen. "Any identification yet, Mr. Spock?" There was no point in straining his eyes, but every Starfleet officer with any real experience was innately certain that his vision could range just a few kilometers further than his ship's electronic scanners. Kirk was no different.

"Not possible yet, Captain," Spock finally declared, "but preliminary sensor analysis indicates an object at least twice our size. Variance could be substantial on closer inspection."

"Not another double of the probe, then," Kirk commented thoughtfully. "I'd feel better if you'd said it was half our size, with variance either way."

"We have no reason to assume it has a hostile intent, Captain,", the first officer felt compelled to point out. "If it acts as its possible predecessor did, we can expect it to regard us with studied indifference."

"People who send drone probes through other people's homes without acknowledging even a hello or how-d'you-do don't strike me as overly friendly, either, Spock."

"The one does not imply the other," Spock argued amiably. Discussion was interrupted by the arrival of new information

on his instruments. "Regardless, it appears extremely unorthodox in design - much more so than the drone." He made a quick check of the proper records.

"No record of anything like it in the Jane's - and Starfleet information insists there should be no vessels of any known civilization cruising in this extreme region."

"Reduce speed to warp-one, Mr. Walking Bear," Kirk murmured.

"Warp-one, sir?" The ensign looked uncertainly over at Arex. The navigator asked the question spinning through the less-experienced officer's mind.

"Same course, sir?"

"Same course, Mr. Arex. Activate minimal field, ultra-extreme scanner, please." Abruptly the starfield ahead seemed to leap toward them, then come to an abrupt stop. Essentially it remained unchanged. Only now an object lay in its approximate center. It was still only a vague blob of light, but it grew larger with perceptible speed.

"Anything out of those hailing frequencies, Lieutenant?" he asked over his shoulder.

"No response, sir," she told him. "So far it's the probe all over again."

"Continue hailing. Try every frequency you know ... and when you've exhausted those used by the Federation, go through the special Klingon, Romulan, and lesser alliance levels."

"You believe the probe and this vessel may be the work of some small, isolated race, Captain?" Arex wondered.

"Not one we know of, Mr. Arex," Kirk said absently, still staring at the unresolved luminescent image growing larger with the minutes. "But it's possible that whoever is behind both craft has had contact with a smaller independent system like Michaya or the Yoolian worlds. If that's the case, they might

respond to such an infrequently used hailing frequency while ignoring ours.

"That doesn't speak well for the supposed friendliness of some of our nominal allies, of course."

"Whatever its purpose or origin, Captain," Spock suddenly announced, staring intently into his gooseneck viewer as he manipulated controls, "it possesses an immense energy aura. The ship itself appears completely encased in it.

"Something on board this craft is generating an enormous quantity of extraneous radiation - for what reason, I cannot tell." More adjustments, new readings - and a new conclusion.

"Fascinating. Additional analysis indicates that the ship's hull is composed wholly of some unknown, unique variety of crystallized ceramic. It appears to possess some characteristics of the lighter metals such as lithium and beryllium while retaining the more malleable properties of -"

Spock's engrossed litany was shattered as a giant, invisible hand clutched the Bridge and shook it violently. Along with everyone else, the first officer concentrated on grabbing for the nearest solid support.

The shaking was accompanied by a loud rumbling. It wasn't a simple, steady vibration; but instead shook them with a distinct up and down, back and forth motion - unlike the effects of the energy field they had traveled through weeks ago while foiling the Romulans' attack.

As the shaking continued, a new sound became audible - a distant declining whine. Kirk recognized the symptoms of engine shutdown even as Walking Bear called out, "We're losing speed, sir - and the helm doesn't answer."

"Dropping to sublight velocity," Arex reported.

Confirmation of his worst suspicions now fulfilled by the instrumentation, Kirk fought to keep from being thrown from his seat as he hit the necessary switch. The rumbling noise was fading, but the shaking continued as violent as ever.

"Bridge to Engineering - Mr. Scott, we're losing speed. Why?"

An uncharacteristic lag in response followed, though the reason was understandable. Scott and his subordinates in Engineering were as interested in keeping their balance as was everyone else.

The chief engineer reported in soon after. "Scott here. Captain, all our engines are still set for warp-two thrust ... but we seem to have run into something like a wall of solid alloy!"

So his supposition was wrong - the engines weren't shut down.

"Maximum thrust, Mr. Scott."

"Aye, sir." A pause, then, "I've got 'er wide open, Captain. We're just not movin'. I dinna know how long the engine bracings can take the strain before they start tearin' themselves loose."

"Understood, Scotty. Nice try." He switched off, redirecting his attention forward. "All engines stop, Mr. Walking Bear."

The helmsman activated instrumentation before him that he never expected to be called to activate. Despite the newness of the operation, his hands moved smoothly in compliance. As the great warp-drive engines ceased forward thrust, the last vestiges of the rumbling noise faded away. The shaking ceased with appalling abruptness.

"All engines stopped, sir," Walking Bear declared into the unnatural silence on the Bridge.

Kirk tried to moderate their present predicament by repeating the Words over and over in his head. He found they provided no more succor than ever. Perhaps he was simply too hyper mentally for artificially imposed constraints like meditation ever to slow him down. Consequently, he was back on the intercom in a minute, as worried and theory-ridden as ever.

"I want a full damage report as soon as possible, Scotty."

"I'm workin' on it now, Captain," the filtered voice replied. "Everythin' seems minor, so far. No structural damage to the support pylons or braces, and no over-heatin' ... at least, nothing the emergency backups couldn't handle.

"Another couple of minutes of that strain, though ... I think we shut down just in time, sir."

"Thank you, Scotty. Maintain full environmental and defensive power, and effect whatever repairs are required with a minimum of delay."

"Will do, sir. Engineerin' out..."

Another call, another problem area. "Bridge to Sick Bay ... casualty report."

"McCoy here," came the slightly irritated reply. "No serious injuries, Jim, just the usual lumps and bruises." He managed to make it sound as if the Bridge personnel were personally responsible for the suffering he had to treat.

"What the devil's going on up there? Who's driving ... no, I've got it. Spock decided to see what would happen if everyone on board suddenly jumped up and down in time to a cycling of the artificial gravity."

"I wish that was all it was, Bones. Bridge out." Kirk glanced across at Spock and saw that the first officer appeared not to have heard McCoy's abrasive sally. To ignore an argumentative invitation by McCoy was a sign that his first officer was worried - and when Spock was worried, that was a good time for anyone in the vicinity to make sure their service insurance was fully paid up.

"What are our chances of getting around this obstacle, Spock?"

"I am sorry to say, Captain, that I do not think that is possible. There is no obstacle to go around ... the obstacle is all around *us*. So we cannot retreat, either."

"Its nature?"

"A globular force-field of unknown origin, in which we are presently entrapped. It is obvious that there can be only one source of so strong and sudden an energy projection - the approaching alien ship."

"But we hit the field at warp-two," Walking Bear blurted in confusion, "and practically stopped dead. We should have been pulverized on impact!"

Spock shook his head patiently, touched a lever. The view ahead changed as short-range scanners cut in. The much wider field of view showed a faint, bluish-white glow which the long-range scanner had pierced. It was very much, Kirk mused, like what the interior of a soap bubble might look like.

Spock was lecturing. "We did not hit a stone wall, Mr. Walking Bear. The globular field did not form instantly around us, at a single position in space. It materialized slowly. As it slowed, we slowed against it in proportion. Even so, according to Chief Scott's report, the stress was almost seriously damaging.

"But I confess I do not understand why we did not suffer more than we did. I cannot explain it, except to point out that the field is of an unfamiliar type." Something beeped behind him and he finished as he turned to his insistent console. "The knowledge responsible for such an impressive piece of physics must be formidable."

He paused, then: "Sensors indicate we are now being probed."

"Captain," Walking Bear exclaimed as he switched back to longer-range scanners, "there it is!"

No gasps issued from those on the Bridge. They'd seen too many wonders on too many worlds to be easily overwhelmed. But the bow view offered of the approaching craft was radical and unexpected enough to set speculation rife in their minds even at this distance.

At first it resembled the face of a demon. Nearness resolved hazy lines into the struts and projections of a real ship - of peculiar design, but a ship nonetheless.

The demon's face was formed by what was probably the command section or bridge. The curving prow formed the rest of the head, while propulsion "wings" hinted at monstrous horns. A round glassy glow the hue of polished onyx was centered in the middle of the construct like a baleful Polyphemian eye.

Every arch, every line of it hinted at an engineering knowledge and sophistication undreamed of by Federation shipwrights. Yet it remained a vessel composed of recognizable sections. One that could have been built by Federation hands if the basic blueprints and knowledge had been supplied.

The command module was unarguably a command module. Propulsion units, winglike or not, could be nothing but propulsion units. All this was evident, despite the differences in size.

"The approaching vessel is slowing," Arex announced laconically into the quiet. "It is..."

Only the ship's battle compensators saved everyone on the Bridge from permanent blindness as pure radiance struck forward.

The vibration died slowly and there was a distant mutter of thunder as air somewhere within the ship was displaced. Kirk didn't need instruments to tell him what had happened.

They had been fired on by an energy weapon of a new type and of considerable power - and they had been hit point blank. Port and starboard scanners locked on the alien as it fired again.

Coruscating breakers of fire foamed across the forward edge of the cruiser's saucer decks and organized confusion reigned on the Bridge as all alert indicators on board flashed crimson.

Half asleep, off-shift personnel who had been awakened before by the severe shaking wondered what was happening as they scrambled for their duty clothes and stations.

"Full power all shields ... all engines, maximum reverse thrust!" Kirk was shouting at Walking Bear. "Try to get us away from that beam!" Even as he finished, another blast of intense energy rocked the battered ship.

Amid the confusion and harried reactions and semi-panic, rose the calm, steady voice of Spock. "Evasive action will not be effective, Captain. The forcefield now surrounding us is ninety-eight point two percent efficient. Our maneuverability is severely limited."

"Maneuvering be hanged!" Kirk cursed as much in frustration as anger. "If that thing can fire in, maybe we can fire out. Mr. Walking Bear, lock main phasers on that ship and fire. Arex, our field of movement appears to be restricted. That means you're going to have to use your imagination to avoid that energy beam."

Ayes echoed from both stations.

The Edoan navigator embarked upon what Kirk later described as a maneuvering miracle. Using only impulse power to minimize stress-threat to the main engines, he managed to shift the cruiser's position within the confined area of the force globe so often and so unpredictably that it suffered only glancing blows from the irresistible energy beam.

At the same time the *Enterprise*'s phasers began to reply with lambent salvos of its own. The destructive double beams sought outward.

Kirk's hopes died when they reached no farther than the interior curve of the pale blue field, where the concentrated energy simply stopped.

"Dispersed, possibly, within the fabric of the field itself," Spock theorized.

Walking Bear continued to fire, but their phasers proved totally ineffective even as the white flame continued to lick at their deflector shields.

"The force globe is selective," Spock commented dispassionately, lending voice to the obvious. "Our attacker can beam us at will and we are helpless to respond."

Kirk mulled this over furiously, hunting for a flaw in the alien's seeming invincibility. They couldn't absorb much more of this intense punishment without overloaded deflectors burning out.

While a force-field is hypothetically capable of dispersing energy among its own fabric, he thought, it is not necessarily effective against more primitive weaponry. Physical objects, for example, possess different properties than those of phaser beams.

He was about to order a full complement of photon torpedoes fired, when the till now unceasing assault unexpectedly stopped. The shaking halted concurrently with the disappearance of the white beam. Behind him, Kirk could hear Uhura struggling to handle the flood of inquiries and reports that started pouring in from every deck and section.

While thankful for the respite, he still remained poised for the barrage to resume at any moment. After all, their best attempts at resistance had already proven childishly weak.

Yet ... the alien had apparently elected to halt its attack. Why? "Cease firing," he ordered, suddenly aware that in the absence of any orders to stop, Walking Bear was persisting in a futile attempt to strike at the belligerent opponent with phasers.

Kirk turned to Spock as the ensign acknowledged the command. "Status on the alien?"

"Still approaching, Captain," Spock told him, his attention fixed on his instruments. "Going sub-light now. It has continued probing us throughout the battle ... a moment." He paused, then, "Its surrounding energy pattern is now shifting."

As they watched in amazement, the field of intense radiance which hugged the alien craft like a tenuous remora, the same

field which had first attracted Spock's attention, began to assume density and color. The hull of the craft remained unaltered as this process accelerated, though it grew increasingly difficult to detect through the darkening fog.

It wasn't long before the fashioning of the ghost was finished. The result was so nearly terrestrial that for a moment Kirk almost suspected the "alien's" ancestry.

But no ... it was similar, but undeniably different. The relationship was one of marriage and not blood. That made it no less startling.

The alien's prow had become a huge snake skull. Jaws hung agape and sported gigantic fangs which curved downward and back. It wore a crest of rainbow-hued feathers vaguely resembling the leathery neck shield of the terran South Pacific frilled lizard. Simulated feathers likewise cloaked the propulsion pods, the illusion heightened by the already winglike construction of the engines themselves. Feathers they were not, only brilliantly colored spines of energy, exquisite in their insubstantiality.

Of all the crew, Walking Bear was the most astonished. Nor did he try to conceal it, staring in open-mouthed awe at the fiery image resplendent on the screen, the bizarre craft draped in the ethereal raiment of a serpentine spirit.

"Ever seen anything like that, Spock?" Kirk asked. The heady apparition was baroquely impressive. But the captain had little time for idle admiration, however. His immediate concerns were more basic.

What were the motives behind such blind hostility - and what was the explanation for this at once juvenile and overpowering display? Exactly how the energy sculpture was accomplished was a question he'd leave for Spock.

The difference between captain and science officer, as usual, was the difference between *Why* and *How*.

Spock was elucidating, "It is not Vulcan-inspired, Captain. Nor do I believe it to be of Klingon or Romulan origin. Romulan,

possibly, but..."

"I recognize it," a voice whispered unexpectedly.

Even Spock showed signs of astonished surprise as everyone on the bridge looked blankly at Walking Bear. The ensign mouthed the word as he continued gazing at the screen.

"Kukulkan."

"The name means nothing to me, Mr. Walking Bear," Kirk pressed when the ensign gave no sign of elaborating.

"Incoming transmission, Cap -"

Uhura never finished the words.

II

The strange, reverberant voice rolled thunderously over the bridge. It was loud, overbearing - but not unbearable - a unique meld as of many voices speaking in unison. Melodious and rhythmic, passionate and forceful, it compelled attention. Kirk stared at the viewscreen image. He began to suspect that it was the ship itself - the ship and its enveloping ghost - that was speaking.

"I attacked you because I believed you had forgotten me. But there is one among you who knows my name."

Kirk shook his head, trying to clear it of the aural cobwebs surrounding the transmission. The voice was engulfed in a swarm of echoes. It was hard to believe there was nothing wrong with his hearing. He found he could force himself to focus on one part of that multi-faceted tone. When he did so he could make out the words, distinct and solemn - and threatening.

"You will be given one more chance to succeed where your ancestors failed. Fail me again and all of your kind shall perish!"

The broadcast concluded as abruptly as it had begun.

"Short and sweet," Kirk murmured. But without any of the explanations he so desperately needed. Now he had all this biblical-sounding business of failing ancestors and incipient annihilation to contend with. What were they supposed to have succeeded at, and how had they failed, and whose ancestors did the voice mean, anyhow? His ... Spock's ... maybe Arex's or those of M'ress's Caitian system.

If the ghost-maker wanted to play God, the least he could do was be a bit more informative...

One thing Kirk *did* know - they were pinioned here by a powerful energy bubble fashioned by an enemy whose actions and words were far from friendly. Before he could decide on a course of action, he had to have facts, information, something on which to hang a supposition. The sole possible source of such information appeared to be a half-green ensign of no combat experience, but with considerable promise.

As Spock returned to his instrumentation and Uhura to communications, Kirk rose from the command chair and walked over to the helm. The subject of his impending - perhaps crucial - questions was sitting silently, apparently thinking hard. But he glanced up readily when Kirk approached.

Kirk started talking in an unintentionally suspicious tone, which he hurriedly corrected. "Mr. Walking Bear, how do you happen to recognize anything about that ship?"

For a split second something very old and very wise flashed in the young helmsman's eyes. Then it was gone, and Kirk couldn't be certain afterward if he'd actually seen it.

"I'm an Amerind, Captain. North America territory, desert - southwest, Comanche tribe. Anthropology's always been a hobby of mine - personal anthropology in particular." He smiled, ever so slightly.

"You have to know, Captain, that I was an example of an almost extinct terran subspecies ... the orphan. So I'm rather more interested in my own history than most people. In the course of pursuing my own past, I've also had occasion to study the history of many earlier Earth cultures. Now the image assumed by that ship out there," he gestured at the screen, "bears a powerful resemblance to a god in ancient Aztec legends - Kukulkan. The variance is minimal ... shockingly so."

Despite the factual knowledge to the contrary, there were still times when Kirk couldn't be sure which was the faster ... the library computer or its master. In any case, Spock spoke up almost immediately.

"Captain, the records confirm Ensign Walking Bear's suspicions. The countenance of the alien is a remarkable analog of the Central American deity Kukulkan. Research shows that the Aztecs and their neighbors and predecessors - the Mayas and Toltecs, Zapotecs, Olmecs and many others - all possessed legends of a winged serpent god."

He nodded toward the screen. "Ensign Walking Bear does not carry his information far enough, however." A quick glance at the readouts produced more startling information. "It seems that many other cultures besides the Indian of Central America include stories of a winged serpent in their mythologies. The Chinese, for example, and many African tribes. He is referred to most often as a wise but terrible god, a bringer of knowledge and..."

"Myoka Mbowe."

"What's that?" Kirk spun, to face the communications station.

"Hmmm?" Uhura snapped out of her daydream. "Sorry, Captain. When I was a little girl, my grandmother used to tell me all the old handed-down fairy tales. Some of the stories revolved around the exploits of a god called Myoka Mbowe. It translates roughly from the Swahili as *winged snake*."

"It is clear, Captain," Spock continued, "that such legends were abundant among Earth's primitive societies."

"So that explains it," Kirk muttered, turning back to the viewscreen. "We've been attacked by a myth." His voice rose slightly, "A terran philosopher once said that there are no myths, only vague distortions of half-remembered truths.

"We could be dealing here with the basis of all those legends, all those millennia-old stories - a space traveler who visited Earth in ancient times."

Spock nodded. "Entirely possible."

"It's not possible," objected Arex. "How can we be dealing with the same ship or traveler who forms the base for such

legends? That would make the being in question many thousands of years old."

"A possibility," Spock observed solemnly, "which cannot be discounted."

"I'll even grant the chance of that, Spock," Kirk allowed, "if you'll tell me what all this business of destroying us, and failing, and ancestor ineffectuality is about? I just can't understand such naked hatred."

Spock had turned back to the quiet scrutiny of his instruments. "I have no doubt that in time, we will be duly informed..."

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Soft sound heavy sound ... the bass engine of a human heart. It sounded clear and regular from the sensor amplifier that was only a tiny part of the incredibly complex diagnostic bed.

Always astonishing, that one muscle on which everything hinges, isn't it, Bones? He studied the figure prone before him.

The sophisticated bed monitoring equipment needed little in the way of external confirmation, but playing safe as always, he passed the belt medicorder over the crewman's forehead. A quick check to insure that the readings matched, and then he laid it back on the nearby table.

"You don't deserve it, specialist," he told the waiting youth gruffly, "but you're getting a few days bed rest."

The security specialist managed a slight smile. One hand gingerly felt the ear McCoy had treated. "It's not necessary, Dr. McCoy. I can handle my duties."

"Mine too? I'll do the prescribing around here. A few days bed rest. Remember, arguing with a superior officer is *almost* as bad as arguing with a doctor. And the next time you get the urge for some off-shift exercise, I suggest you try something besides high-diving into a minimum-level pool."

"Don't worry, Doctor," the specialist cringed. "I had to learn the hard w -" His mouth opened wide.

While the pain in his ear had abated under McCoy's skillful ministrations, it now seemed as if his other faculties had been affected for the worse.

Certainly his eyes were hardest hit, because he could swear that McCoy had become enveloped in a stuttering, immobilizing light, as though attacked by a turquoise strobe. It froze McCoy next to the bed without touching his patient.

It seemed that the flickering light appeared and died faster and faster. It seemed that McCoy was trying to say something. It seemed that Dr. McCoy had vanished.

The...

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Scott was alone in the jeffries tube. He was inspecting the circuitry which ran from the great warp-drive engines to the engineering computer.

Actually, it was a job any engineering tech could have handled. But when the usual twelve desperate crises weren't clamoring for his immediate attention, Scott always made time for carrying out some of the more routine tasks of engineering maintenance by himself. It was always beneficial, he felt, for an experienced engineer to immerse himself in the plebeian from time to time, to work with a fluid-state hydrometer instead of giving orders.

And besides, he enjoyed it.

Running the tricorder across yet another opened panel cover gave him the same feeling of aesthetic enjoyment, the same emotional satisfaction as he followed micro-chips and coupled modules, that another man might have found in a painting by Turner or a Brahms symphony. Such diffuse and openly gushing creations would have as little appeal to him as to Spock. Scott's artistic tastes were well suited to his profession - Escher for art, say, and Stockhausen in music.

He refastened the panel and prepared to run the compact instrument over the next one. The radiance which enveloped him as he started upward was the blue of a Baja sky.

Then he was gone, the tricorder crying out hollowly for him as it clattered and pinged its way down the open passage...

The Four...

***

Kirk paced the deck in front of the command chair. It was simplistic and unscientific; and like many simplistic and unscientific remedies, it worked. He wondered who the first human was who discovered that one of the better salves for the harried mind lay in the feet.

"There's got to be a solution to this deadlock," he was mumbling. "Probably right in front of our eyes." He turned toward the helm. "Mr. Walking Bear, what do the legends say about..."

Walking Bear dissolved in a rain of blue gas followed by a tiny bang as a puff of air rushed in to occupy the space formerly displaced by the ensign.

As if he could snatch him back from an unknown fate, Kirk rushed the seat. But the helmsman was gone. To make sure, Kirk moved his hands through the air above the helm seat. No, the body of Walking Bear hadn't been made invisible - it had been made absent.

The Four Are...

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"Captain," a hesitant voice called. Still dazed by this new development, Kirk turned to face Uhura. She sounded equally stunned, almost apologetic. "Security reports from both Sick Bay and Engineering. Both Dr. McCoy and Chief Engineer Scott have disappeared.

"No one saw Mr. Scott vanish. We have a report on Dr. McCoy's disappearance, however. Apparently he was administering treatment to an injured security specialist..." she paused a moment to listen, "Jo van Dreenan, at the time. He claims that Dr. McCoy was held motionless within a blue haze, then he vanished, just like..." She nodded toward the now empty helm chair.

Kirk turned to the main viewscreen, where the ghostly alien still hovered directly ahead. There was as much curiosity as anger in his question.

"What are they, or it, doing to my crew?"

A thorough visual demonstration negates the necessity for words. The pulsating blue amoeba ingested Kirk, flickered briefly, and took him, too.

"Captain!" Spock shouted. There was no response. Now the first officer's gaze likewise turned to the viewscreen, and he thought things which, while not exactly emotional, were far from flattering.

But though he wished it aloud among the imprecations, the blue light did not reappear to take him too...

The Four Are Chosen.

***

A vast, gray plain, open and desolate. Dull gray ground reaching to a featureless horizon, melting into a sky the color of antimony. Color began to brighten one tiny bit of it.

The four did not appear simultaneously. And although McCoy was the first chosen, he was not the first to appear. That privilege was reserved for Walking Bear. He was followed by Scott, then Kirk, and the good doctor last of all.

This sequence was intentional and proper. It was not, as a human observer might guess, executed at random. It was only that Kukulkan's science made use of space-time theorems that Scott would have sneered at.

Lead landscape and dirty-cotton hills, rippling rain-laden sky without moisture. Gray pseudopods of rippling gray lakes. It was as drab as an idle thought.

Each man reacted with differing degrees of surprise and alarm as he rematerialized. No one stopped to analyze whether it was instinct or common sense that prompted them to move close to one another, their backs to a common center.

Kirk was the first to recover and commence examining their surroundings. As soon as he had perceived that there was no immediate threat to their continued existence, his powerful curiosity had taken over. He was already gauging their chances for escape ... even though he had no specific idea where they were.

Generally, however, he felt safe in commenting: "We're somewhere inside the other ship." Silence from his three companions indicated they shared that opinion.

It was absolutely silent in that unimaginative arena. No breeze ruffled the atmosphere.

"No cover," Scott noted. "And us without a single phaser or communicator between us."

"I have a suspicion neither would be of much use, Scotty."

"That may be so, Captain, but I'd settle for a nice, ineffective laser cannon all the same. Purely as a psychological prop, of course."

Kirk smiled faintly. "Me too, Scotty."

McCoy was looking down at himself and patting his waist. "I've still got my belt medikit, for all the good that's worth."

"I hope you won't have to use it, Bones."

"Hold on." Scott looked puzzled. "I had an engineering tricorder with me. It must have remained behind on the ship when I was brought over. So why weren't Dr. McCoy's medical 'corder and supplies interfered with?"

"Where was it, Scotty?"

"Right in my fist, Captain. I was inspecting some circuitry with it."

Kirk shrugged. "That might explain it. Probably the instruments that were monitoring our transport read Bones', kit as part of his clothing, whereas you were more noticeably employing yours as a tool. I don't think you'd find much use for it here."

"Maybe not, Captain," Scott replied, "but then, I'm a full-time believer in the hairpin hypothesis."

"Hairpin hypo ... what's that?" McCoy wondered aloud.

"An old engineer's adage that goes way back, Doctor," explained Scott. "It states that 'no tool is so useless that something can't be found it can be used to fix' ... but I'd still rather have a phaser."

"I'm beginning to believe Spock was right about the entity behind all this," Kirk allowed. "That drone probe was unlikely, this ship is unlikely, and its method of communication the most unlikely of all. So I suppose the possibility that we're dealing with a being thousands of years old is no more unlikely than the others have been. When it begins acting rationally, that's when I guess I'll start doubting this." He turned to the youngest of the four.

"Mr. Walking Bear, do the legends say what eventually happened to this Kukulkan? Old cultures usually disposed of their gods neatly."

"Only that he left and promised to return one day, sir."

Kirk looked satisfied. "Sounds like all the promises ascribed to all the ancient gods of Earth." He looked from one to the other. "I don't think we need doubt that the drone probe was an information gatherer for this Kukulkan." He turned pensive.

"I only wish I knew what it was in that information that's caused the receiver to act in such an unfriendly manner,

without even giving us a chance to find out what's behind all this. I..." He hesitated.

"What is it, Jim?" asked McCoy, sounding worried.

"Listen." They fell silent. In the complete quiet a distant buzz became audible ... muted but unmistakable. In grew louder, and then familiar.

It was the sound of many tongues speaking simultaneously. It had overtones of pure alienness, which did not bother Kirk at all. It also hinted of expectancy, which did.

"We're being watched, I think," commented McCoy, eyeing the gray bowl of sky uneasily.

"When I was a child," Walking Bear murmured, "I used to hide in a hall closet when I was supposed to be asleep, so I could listen to the adults talking in the sitting room. There wasn't a minute when I wasn't afraid the door would fly open to show my foster mother standing there, glaring down at me, ready to send me to bed with a beating." He studied the featureless plain.

"Strange how the earliest emotions linger the longest."

Kirk faced his chief engineer. "Is there any way Spock could get through to us with a transporter beam?"

"I don't think so, sir," Scott said, shaking his head in resignation. "Our sensors couldn't penetrate this ship's screens. And since our phasers couldn't break out of the energy bubble around the ship, I don't see a transporter beam doin' any better."

The steady buzz intensified. The four men diligently searched the horizon, at once hoping to see something, and hoping not to. Then the insectlike hum seemed to coalesce. The resulting voice still had touches of many, but now the words were distinct - and comprehensible.

"Now I will show to you the seeds that I have sown before," it pontificated. "Learn from them ... find the purpose if you can.

If you can do so, then and only then will I appear before you."

The buzzing voice faded to nothingness. Even as it was dying away, it was drowned by a profound thunder, as though immense engines were stirring underfoot, in the air, in the gray walls enclosing them.

As Kirk stared and tried not to sweat - there were less elaborate ways of killing four men, and anyway, the voice had said they had some seeds to inspect, whatever that meant - the landscape began to change color. Initially it shifted to an orange-gray. As the concussive rumble mounted, the gray gave way to a pure, almost blinding orange. Distances were indeterminate, but it seemed a sun appeared in open sky above. It was lambent orange. The rumbling reached a peak whereupon definite tones could be heard. They verged on music, but then so did the machinery of a kilometers-square factory. It was almost, McCoy thought, as if an enormous organ was playing somewhere - woodwind, violin, flute and chime pipes all weaving in and out among the deepest pedal notes. Everything participating, he mused, but a vox humana. He didn't expect to hear anything as comforting as that.

The Ivesian mosaic softened and orange turned to blue. Apparently Kukulkan's usable spectrum differed from theirs.

The result of all the activity began manifesting itself. First the familiar vegetation started to appear. Palm trees, huge ferns, vines and creepers lacing together a network of trees rose from the orange-blue ground. Dense undergrowth filled in the empty places like an afterthought.

It surrounded them on three sides, leaving only the ground directly ahead still barren. A trickle of running water could be heard; but even so, the amazing simulacrum still lacked something.

Kirk fixed on it a moment later. This was a curiously lifeless simulacrum. There were no animal sounds. No birds, no complaining primates ... not even the addle pated hum of a hunting wasp. There were no smells, either, of hidden creatures. There should have been the musky odor of mobile

life. Instead, there was only the oddly uninviting perfume of huge blossoms, the pungent miasma of steaming greenery.

Nothing. For all its color this fabricated jungle was as dead as the gray womb they had just vacated.

As if in anger, the rumbling sound returned. This time it was accompanied by a violent vibrating which rattled Kirk's teeth and pricked at his spine.

Lines appeared in the open ground before them. This section was mostly lower than the slight rise they stood on, and Kirk could see rectangles and squares being laid out on the orange. Something was tracing a city there.

It began to sprout, weedlike, from the porous ground.

Had he overlooked the possibility that they had been transported to some far world, and there ensconced in a clay cavern? No ... the structures forming in front of him were made of something similar to, but far more sophisticated than clay. Then he recognized it - the material was almost identical to the strange crystalline substance of the alien's hull.

Hints of many cultures were embodied in those buildings: touches of Mayan architecture, Aztec edification, of Egyptian engineering and Southeast Asian religious construction and a host of a hundred others. Not all were extinct, but all were distinct. Yet they blended in a way which suggested that this fabrication and not the aged realities was the end to which they had all been striving.

Fragmentary Sumer merged with oil-age New York baroque. Bits of Inca regularity were subsumed by the curves of dead Monomotapa. Everything was enmeshed in its neighbor, interwoven and entwined and interchanged.

Despite this, the commandments of basic geometry held court, and somehow it all worked.

The city seemed livable, if not downright inviting. Nor did it appear all that primitive. Some of the angles and reflective

buttresses were unrecognizable even to Scott's experienced eye.

The chief engineer was more interested in the material than in the method. It looked like ordinary stone ... but when the sun struck a wall or parapet at a certain angle, the hard reflection that resulted was more suited to polished metal. And if you squinted a little with your eyes - and mind - various structures seemed built of opaque glass.

What could only be the city's entrance lay immediately before them, an open gate flanked by two sleek cylindrical towers. They resembled Egyptian obelisks. Yet when the light changed a little it was clear they were akin to the great towers once raised by the mystic artist-architects of Mohenjo Daro.

Just as Kirk was convinced the construction was complete, the persistent rumble rose almost painfully in volume. As the ground quaked underfoot, a single colossal structure leaped skyward from the city center. Dominating the skyline, it seemed to pull all the lines of each and every building, every tower and wall, together to form an unbreakable metropolitan whole. It was the highest facet on a well-cut gem.

As the final block appeared, and the last decoration materialized on the walls, the rumbling sound died for the final time.

The four officers were left to stand and wonder at a city at once alien and familiar. And no wonder, for it was the city man had almost raised half a hundred times, all across his world. The city that shows up in the corner of an architect's eye but never seems the same when committed to blueprint ... the city men see in old dreams...

As if any more was necessary, here was yet further proof that whatever else this Kukulkan was, he was not an entity to be mocked.

There was much care and purpose behind all this display. Despite the near cataclysmic threats inherent in that many-toned voice, Kirk couldn't help but feel a certain thrill of expectation at imminent revelations of the highest import.

Within that city might lie explanations for all the mythologies of mankind.

That would not please some people.

"I've never seen anything quite like it, Captain," Scott murmured appreciatively at the eerie beauty of it, "not in all my landfalls on many worlds."

"What's behind it, though?" wondered McCoy.

Kirk spoke thoughtfully. "The voice spoke of seeds and unfulfilled deeds, Bones. An enormous puzzle's been set before us. Let's start inspecting the pieces."

They headed for the city gate....

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An assistant engineer was aiding Spock as the first officer worked at Scott's Bridge engineering station. Another technician stood ready nearby, to respond to muted commands with information or manipulation of certain instruments.

Sulu was at the helm now, the position vacated so startlingly by Ensign Walking Bear. All stations, in fact, were double-manned back throughout the *Enterprise*, as it remained on red alert. Everyone knew that the captain and three others had been taken. No one would sleep until their fate was known.

While the force-field enclosing them gave no sign of weakening, Spock wanted to be ready should their still unknown assailant give them the slightest chance to break free.

He concluded his operations at the engineering station and crossed back toward his own.

Uhura chose that moment to voice the concern which had been building in her for many minutes. "Mr. Spock, shouldn't

we be trying to find out what's become of the captain, Dr. McCoy and the others?"

"Lieutenant Uhura, you are supposed to be monitoring the alien vessel for any possible incoming communiques. You know that our first priority is to free the *Enterprise* and ourselves. As soon as that is accomplished, we can attend to the release of all kidnapped personnel. Continue with your regular duties."

"Yes, sir," she muttered. Spock began recalling information from the library. She continued to stare at him for a long moment and then returned her attention to her own console. She might have been muttering something under her breath. Then again, she might not. Uhura could be unreadable at times.

***

Four men stood almost respectfully before the towering spires guarding the city's central boulevard. Close inspection convinced Kirk that they *were* Egyptian obelisks.

"With at least one significant difference, sir," Walking Bear exclaimed.

Kirk remembered that Walking Bear was only an amateur anthropologist. He wished for Spock's more definitive explanations. But Spock wasn't here. In his absence, they would have to depend on the ensign's informal readings. So far, though, he had to admit, the young helmsman's observations had been as accurate as anyone could wish.

"It's those carvings, sir," Walking Bear was explaining as he pointed to incisions about three meters off the ground on the nearest tower.

Kirk eyed them.

They had been exquisitely rendered by a careful, expert hand, he would have said, had he not seen the entire city raised from - *not the dust, Kirk,* he warned himself. *Don't get biblical*

- you've encountered races with matter-manipulation abilities before.

He couldn't identify the style of carving. The subjects seemed uncomplicated, though. Animals and people from many different countries and regions of ancient Earth.

"Notice that one there, sir," Walking Bear suggested. "The third row over, first on the bottom."

Kirk found the indicated carving and instantly understood why the ensign attached such significance to it. It bore an uncanny resemblance to the ghost image which now cloaked Kukulkan's ship, that of a feathered serpent. In this particular rendition the wings were spread wider, and the body was coiled. It hovered over a lifelike flurry of little cuts which could only be water.

"No Egyptian ever carved anything like that, sir."

Kirk nodded, indicated they should continue on. They passed through the gate, which Scott claimed closely approximated some ruins he'd encountered in old China. For his part, Walking Bear maintained that the wall braces backing the towers and arch overhead could only be Scythian in origin.

"Can't pin it down," he finally confessed. "It's like the rest of this place, only on a smaller scale. There's that weird blend of many unrelated civilizations again."

"Everything's a clue, Walking Bear," said Kirk. "Remember, this city is intended to be one gigantic riddle. If nothing seems to belong to its neighbor, that must be significant, too."

The avenue they were walking down was wide and well paved with blocks composed of that same strange stone-metal-glass mix. They continued down it for what felt like a fair distance, examining each structure in turn as they passed it. Every one was finished down to the tiniest detail. Painstaking care had been exercised in this gargantuan recreation, which in turn was part of some still unknown charade.

It was the less amiable McCoy who finally called a halt to the seemingly endless hike. "Okay, so we're here - so, what are we supposed to do now?"

"Your opinion, Mr. Walking Bear?"

The ensign looked at him in surprise. He suspected the captain's growing confidence in him; he was used to offering opinions to the computer in study center, in response to queries posed in technical manuals - not to the ship's captain. For a moment he could only gawk helplessly.

"Come on, Ensign," Kirk finally urged, sensing the other's lack of assurance. "We're all of us equally on trial here."

"Sir, I ... I haven't the faintest idea what we're expected to do."

"Just tell me what comes to you," Kirk soothed. "Tell us more about Kukulkan ... maybe something useful will surface." He smiled encouragingly.

Walking Bear grinned slightly. "Well ... before he left, the legends say Kukulkan gave the Mayas their remarkably accurate calendar, instructing them to build a great city according to its cycles. On the day the city was finished, he was supposed to return."

As he told the weathered story, the orange-blue sun shone down on them with unvarying warmth, never stirring from its assigned place in the sky.

"The Mayas built their city and waited. Something about it must have been wrong, because Kukulkan never returned. Maybe they paid too much attention to the parts of the calendar that told them the best times for planting corn ... I don't know.

"They tried again and again ... at Chichen Itza, Tulum, Uxmal and others. None induced the god to return." He glanced at the silent structures bordering the avenue. "As Mr. Spock said, many cultures have such legends."

"The history of Earth," Kirk whispered, "is a history of unfulfilled promises," but no one else heard him. He spoke again, more briskly. "Kukulkan must have visited many of those ancient peoples. It appears each used only parts - different parts - of his knowledge to build their own cities."

"Does that mean they were all trying to build something that was supposed to look like this?" McCoy asked.

Walking Bear hedged. "I *think* so, sir, but they all failed. The Mayas used one part, the Indus River civilizations another, the builders of Zimbabwe yet another ... over and over, failure after failure, the original knowledge growing more and more distorted with each succeeding culture."

"I see," commented McCoy. "An architectural Tower of Babel."

"Sometimes I wonder about us humans, Bones," Kirk murmured. "Someone could come along and hand us the plans for the ultimate civilization - and we'd manage to bollix it up somehow. We're too vain, as a race and as individuals.

"There's always someone who has to improve perfection, just to get his hundredth of a credit in." His voice grew tauter. "Though from what I've seen of this Kukulkan and his methods this far, I wouldn't bet that some farsighted city builders didn't perform a little sabotage on those building instructions."

"Kukulkan said he would appear only when we learned the city's purpose," Walking Bear reminded them. "Unfortunately, none of the legends mention what that purpose was."

Kirk ran his hand over the hair above his neck. "Let's use what facts we have. Supposedly these cities were built to bring Kukulkan back to Earth. How? Obviously he hasn't been hanging around Earth, or anywhere else in our neck of the galaxy for the last several thousand years to see if someone eventually hit it right.

"That means this city has to hold some kind of signaling device." The structures surrounding them took on new meaning. "It can't be too complicated. It has to be something

the Egyptians or Mayas could have built, and out of local materials. The basic technology can't be too advanced, either.

"That means we're not going to find any deep-space transmitters housed in a stone pyramid. This Kukulkan's approach to basic physics seems pretty different from our own. I don't see why some simple yet efficient communicating system couldn't utilize equally unorthodox technology.

"It has to be in plain sight, I think. After all, the transmitting machinery is the reason behind building the entire city." He gestured down the street they were on.

"That central pyramid is the city's physical and visual focal point. Seems a good place to start."

In the humid silence of an unlengthening day, they started toward it...

III

Eventually they stood at one corner of the ziggurat, at the intersection of the main boulevard and several smaller avenues. At the center of this modest intersection rose a small tower. It wasn't a very big tower, but that did not detract from its impressiveness. Roughly five meters high, it bore a definite resemblance to the elaborately worked, gilded temple towers of the Southeast Asia sector of Earth.

Rounded and roughly ovoid, it was made up of eight tiers of progressively diminishing size, cut from brightly colored stone. At the top of the spire was a graven image of Kukulkan's head. It was exquisitely executed, finely detailed. Everything looked lifelike - the serpent head with its gaping fanged mouth, the collar of metal and glass feathers around the neck, and the rainbow feathered frill formed of inlaid semiprecious stones.

Tilted up and back, the head stared into the sky at a forty-five degree angle, facing away from the pyramid behind. It wore a baleful expression, at once expectant and commanding.

At the sharp-edged corner of the enormous pyramid, a stairway built to human proportions started upward. As near as they could tell it reached to the top of the massive stone structure. At the moment, though, their attention was held by the impressive sculpture from which the web of roads radiated.

"Funny," Walking Bear was murmuring, hands resting on hips as he studied the sculpture, "I've never seen a representation like this before."

Kirk glanced up at the pyramid behind them, then back to his companions. "Since the big pyramid's the center of everything, I'd guess it also has something to do with the answer to everything. Maybe it's at the top. I'm going up. The

rest of you spread out and circle it. Try to stay within earshot of each other, within sight if possible. Anyone finds anything that demands immediate evaluation, he gives a holler. Don't try operating any levers or doorhandles without calling someone else to help. I don't want anyone vanishing down trick hallways."

"Aye, sir ... yes, sir ... okay, Jim," came the replies. Kirk started up the seemingly endless series of steps, while the others split up.

Scott and Walking Bear hadn't gone far to the south before the ensign picked out a distinctive shape far down the walkway. He pointed. "Another tower, I think, sir."

"Come on, lad."

They broke into a trot. As they drew nearer and nearer, they saw that Walking Bear was right. Furthermore, this new structure was more than just another tower ... it was an exact duplicate of the one they had just encountered.

It lay in the center of another confluence of streets, as had the first. Walking Bear spared it only a glance before strolling out to where he could peer around the pyramid's corner.

Only the unnatural clarity of the air within the huge chamber enabled him to identify the outlines of the dim object in the distance.

"There's a third tower down this way, sir. There must be one at each of the four corners..."

***

Kirk didn't waste energy panting. There was no one around to sympathize. And he had gauged the hike accurately - no difficult task for a man used to estimating astronomical distances. So when he arrived at the top he was more psychologically than physically winded.

He was almost disappointed. The revelation he had hoped for consisted only of a flat, square platform supported on four

poles. It perched in unimpressive solitude atop the pyramid. Its sole distinction was that it seemed made of metal - more metal than they'd seen anywhere in the city in one place. But closer inspection failed to disclose the nature of the alloy.

The square itself framed a lustrous, transparent round mosaic depicting Kukulkan in the same coiled, in-flight pose carved on the gate obelisks. The mosaic seemed to be encased in clear quartz, but Kirk didn't trust his initial estimates here. It did look like quartz, though.

He could just see over the top of the platform. There was no question of the mosaic's importance. It was a magnificent piece of craftsmanship, worthy of a fine jeweler, resplendent in its rendering. Other than its opulent beauty, however, it held no attraction for the captain.

Kirk crouched slightly to see beneath the platform. The bottom of the transparent mosaic was as flawless as the top. Passing through it, the rays of the artificial sun cast the winged serpent image clear and sharp on the stone beneath. Dust motes danced in the painted light.

Everything had been arranged here with extreme precision, to produce ... what? Kirk rose and eyed the top of the mosaic once more, looked down at the image it cast on the stone, and considered thoughtfully.

***

Walking Bear and Scott were absorbed in their inspection of the second ornamental tower. They had negotiated the easy climb and now stood at the top, even with the sculpted serpent head.

Nearness brought knowledge concealed by height. Immediately they noticed two things not visible from ground level.

For one, the eyes of the statue were composed of concentric inlays of some translucent glassy material instead of opaque rock. Of more obvious significance was the faceted prism like

some huge gem which was securely positioned at the back of the stone gullet.

Scott's engineering sense was more intrigued by, say, the controls of a ship than its more impressive bulk. Consequently, while Walking Bear was engrossed in deep study of the eyes and prism, his older companion was busily examining the collar of inlaid feathers which circled the statue's neck. He was hunting for imperfections more significant than the perfection, and he found one at the base of the fringed collar.

"Looks like there's a seam here. I think the head is meant to be turned. Come on, lad, give me a hand."

Lining himself up with his hands on the back of the collar, he directed Walking Bear to press in the same clockwise direction with both hands on the lower stone jaw. Together they shoved.

There was a rasp and squeak as of metal on rock ... or maybe rock on metal, given the peculiar composition of the building materials here.

More important, the head seemed to move a little.

"Try again, lad." Both men strained, using their body weight against the recalcitrant sculpture. Something snapped inside and the head started to turn smoothly on a hidden pivot. As it turned to the sun, the glassy eyes began to glow, to shine with an inner light that appeared far stronger than mere reflection.

Scott and Walking Bear were too absorbed in the effort of turning the head to notice this new development. Fortunately, someone else was in the perfect position to do so.

Even from his high perch the intensity of the glow in the statue's eyes was so commanding that Kirk noticed it immediately. He spun and shielded his own eyes as he stared upward, muttering excitedly to himself.

"Of course ... the sun! No wonder it hasn't moved .. the position is crucial to the city riddle." He turned downward and

shouted through cupped hands. No wind kidnapped his call.

"Scotty! Turn the head a hundred and eighty degrees, so that it looks up here!"

The chief engineer's voice echoed back faintly. "Aye, sir."

The head had been turned almost completely around when the polished prism in its mouth also began to shine. Simultaneously, the brightness of the inlaid eyes grew so brilliant that Kirk could no longer look directly at them without squinting. As the carved skull ground the last few degrees, a beam of light suddenly sprang from the serpent's jaws toward the top of the pyramid. It was accompanied by a hissing sound that grew rapidly louder.

Kirk had moved clear. Like a reaching arm, the combined triple beam of eyes and mouth passed directly before him, between the two nearest poles. It struck the underside of the mosaic held carefully suspended by the metal platform. The result was marvelous and unexpected.

As the nearly solid light from below struck the mosaic and passed through it, steady explosions of glittering energy formed in the air directly above, forming and bursting and bursting and forming like bubbles in champagne.

The hissing became a nervous crackling sound. It reminded Kirk of an incomplete electrical connection - though nothing so simple was at work here. Below, Walking Bear and Chief Scott stared anxiously upward, awaiting word from Kirk.

They could see the glow at the top of the pyramid, the distant figure of the captain silhouetted before it. But at this distance they couldn't tell anything else. A moment later and they were reassured as the diminutive form called down to them.

"Turn the other heads this way," the voice ordered. Scott yelled acknowledgment, and both men started down from the tower.

As soon as he saw them moving, Kirk edged around to the other side of the platform area, carefully avoiding the beam.

He spotted McCoy waiting patiently by the base of the fourth tower.

"Bones! The serpent's head - turn it to face the pyramid! I'm coming down."

The stone skull was heavy .. . too heavy for one man. McCoy was still struggling with it when Walking Bear and Scott got the second head moving.

Again the tongue of light leaped upward to strike at the pyramid's apex. Now they could hear the crackling sound as it intensified with the addition of this second, source of power, see the color of the strange energy deepen.

It remained for Kirk to give McCoy a hand in turning the next head. That finished, they climbed down and headed for the remaining sculpture. All four men met at the last tower, the one they had originally encountered.

For the fourth time the procedure was performed, sending a beam of intense light upward. The top of the pyramid, as Scott and Walking Bear descended, was now completely engulfed by the sphere of pure energy roiling angrily above it.

Abruptly the crackling hiss gave way to a thunderous rumbling, utterly unlike the sound which had accompanied the raising of the city. It dropped in volume, deepened until it seemed as if the very fabric of existence was being punctured by that glittering ball.

Streaks of pure light occasionally shot lightninglike through the multihued nimbus as it continued to grow and expand.

Below, the four officers had to shield their eyes as the glow from the top of the pyramid intensified to where it was greater than the sun.

"The whole thing," Kirk yelled as a breeze sprang up strongly around them, whipping at. uniforms and hair, "is some kind of energy amplification device based on solar power - Kukulkan's special signal!"

The tenor of the rumbling changed to a steady drone as the energy ball began a steady pulsing. That's when the voices returned. Many voices joined as one. But this time the stentorian susurration sounded even above the pulsating signal, reverberated until the multiple distortions were sloughed off like dead thoughts.

Gradually, the many whispers solidified until what they heard was, for the first time, unmistakably the voice of a single being.

"After scores of centuries," the voice boomed, "my design has been fulfilled. Behold me, then, as I am!"

The energy globe vanished in an air-splitting explosion. McCoy and Scott were both thrown to the ground. Kirk managed to grab the tower for support, while Walking Bear somehow succeeded in maintaining his balance.

The last flicker of energy was gone, dissipated in the magnificence of its own disruption by a force still greater. In its place was a hovering, fluttering form that was at once terrifying and beautiful. It was garbed in a cloak of glowing light. Huge membranous wings beat the air as it drifted above the pyramid. Multicolored, scaled torso coiling and recoiling reflexively, neck plumage shifting through a rainbow of brilliance, the massive shape stared down at them. Dragon tongue darted in and out of fanged maw, while dragon eyes glared past flaring nostrils.

"Behold Kukulkan," the apparition rumbled, still enveloped by now dimmed light from the four energy beams. Kirk listened and studied, trying to read the motivation masked by those crimson eyes.

"Where are your weapons of destruction?" came the next query. "Use them on me if you dare!"

"Very impressive, if a bit theatrical," McCoy commented phlegmatically. He'd discovered long ago that no matter how powerful or malign an adversary, if one regarded it merely as an anatomical problem to be mentally dissected, the commoner fears could be conveniently laid aside.

His mind was also occupied with hunting for the reasons behind this unnecessarily overwhelming display.

It was Kirk who answered, however. "We have no weapons with us ... as you undoubtedly know. If we did, we'd use them only with reason. We haven't been given such a reason yet."

The monster threshed air, wings beating angrily. The energy cloak which clung to him ran through the visible spectrum.

"Reasons? Reasons ... Where is your hate, then? Is that not reason enough? You hate me, do you not? Why then do you not speak to me of your hate?"

Kirk didn't know how to feel. Threatened? No - he was only puzzled. Despite its amply demonstrated power, there was a pathos about this creature he couldn't quite isolate. But that didn't permit him to lower his guard for a second.

"We don't hate you. You fired your weapons at my ship. We fired back."

The energy belt turned deep, furious purple and he added hurriedly. "We acted in self-defense - if you understand the term."

"I am your master!" the serpent roared. "I may do with you as I will, when I wish."

Madder and madder, Kirk mused, his thoughts awhirl. Obviously this entire display was concocted to intimidate them. But this would-be god had aimed at humans of a bygone age, men of less experienced times and readier belief in the supernatural. His words only made those standing below him angry.

"You think we belong to you?" McCoy exclaimed. "We're not part of the furniture of your cold gray house, Kukulkan."

"Aye, and don't plan to be," Scott added.

Kirk spoke quietly, firmly. "Bones, Scotty - don't antagonize it."

"Antagonize it?" Scott argued. "Captain, it's not exactly in a friendly frame of mind right now."

"It is as I thought," the serpent muttered, "you have forgotten me and strayed from the path I set for you."

Kirk spread his arms. The gesture was a plea for information, not mercy. "You say we've forgotten you. How then can you expect us to worship you properly, if we don't remember you and know nothing of the path of which you speak? Are we expected to suffer for the transgressions of ancestors dead these many generations?"

To his relief, this was so reasonable sounding that it appeared to have a mollifying effect on the snake-god. It settled to the top of the pyramid.

"There is Some truth in your words. You do not know me. Therefore it is my task to teach you."

That worried Kirk some. He had no idea what was meant by teaching here. One thing he was certain of: judging from what they knew of this alien's character so far instruction might not be too pleasant.

As they watched, the atmosphere turned turquoise - the same blue haze that had lifted them from the *Enterprise*. It enveloped everything around them - pyramid, tower, city and jungle.

When the blue fog cleared, and their vision with it, they found themselves standing in a large, high-ceilinged room. The city was gone. The room seemed to stretch off to infinity, optical illusion though Kirk knew it must be. Kukulkan's science was unpredictable, but he didn't think it extended to creating infinite space aboard a ship of finite dimensions.

Everything was rounded and curved, smooth here as the city had been sharp-angled. The room itself was well-lit and shaded a deep, rich purple.

Levels and platforms hung scattered throughout the room without any visible support. Set on and around them were

dozens of transparent cubicles ... round, square, oddly shaped. More of the same glasslike cages rested on the floor of the chamber.

The whole arrangement was curiously ... curiously - Kirk struggled for the right word - sterilized. Yes, hard and sterile.

No bars or force barriers of recognizable type were evident. Some of the containers held plants, others animals. Many of both were unknown to the widely traveled senior officers. Each cage had a pair of thick cables running from it. The cables disappeared into floor or ceiling.

Other wild vegetation grew out in the open, uncaged. Kukulkan was nowhere to be seen.

"Just once," McCoy grumbled, "I wish he'd let us use the stairs."

Kirk examined the incredible collection. "Everything in here is designed to be looked at. I think the idea is that we do some looking."

He selected one path at random among the cubicles and they started down.

"What the devil is this place?" Scott wondered.

"Looks like some kind of zoo," a dubious McCoy commented.

He walked over to one of the glassy cages and tentatively felt of the surface. His hand drew back in surprise. Despite the glassy sheen, the wall had a greasy feel.

This particular cage housed a creature that resembled a hallucinatory vision of a giant platypus. It surged and heaved about within, obviously oblivious to their presence and as near as they could tell, perfectly happy.

"There're a lot of species here I don't recognize, Jim," McCoy told him.

"Me too, Bones. Species - I don't even recognize some of the environments. Look at that one."

The cage he indicated was filled with a red gas holding pink spongy globules in suspension. Within this atmosphere swam - or flew - a spotted yellow disk encircled with cilia. It looked blankly toward them with four eyes sporting double pupils.

Abruptly (but not unexpectedly) they were joined by another observer. Kukulkan hovered slightly above them and to one side. None of the men moved closer.

But when the serpent spoke the cordiality in its voice was in startling contrast to the violence it had displayed on their confrontation at the pyramid.

"Please feel free to examine any of my specimens."

Specimens? What did this awesome assemblage of life portend? Another mystery they would have to pry out of Kukulkan.

Scott, however, had long since put aside diplomacy in favor of honesty. He shook his head sadly as he surveyed the endless rows of cubicles. "I could never be proud of putting wee beasties in cages. We've long since abandoned such barbarism on Earth."

Kirk glared at his chief engineer, but Kukulkan took no offense.

"All these here lead a peaceful, healthy life. One that is safe and contented."

McCoy had strolled over to a nearby cage. Now he indicated its occupant - a furry, multilegged ball. It was plucking tiny grapelike fruit from a small bush.

"Contented? Cramped in these little cages?"

"Ah, but what you cannot see," the drifting alien explained, "is that each creature is *mentally* in its own natural environment. The fields of the mind are infinite," he concluded profoundly,

as McCoy bent to examine the cables leading out of the cage. They ran from the floor into an uninformative, featureless black box attached to the cubicle base.

"They eat, breathe and exist," Kukulkan continued, "in worlds dreamed up by my machines. Worlds that only they can see. Nor do they see you. Nothing is permitted to disturb their satisfying, endless vistas. Each lives its own ideal dream. They do not know they are in cages."

"A cage is a cage no matter how padded the bars," Scott whispered.

Kukulkan's hearing was far from godlike, the chief engineer had long since decided. Nor could he read minds. Otherwise he would have dealt with Scott back at the pyramid.

"Then the city whose puzzle we solved," Walking Bear exclaimed in a sudden burst of realization, "wasn't really there!"

"It was 'there'," Kukulkan informed them, "because I wished it so, for you, and me.

"Each of my specimens has a world of its own far greater than the puny city I created for you."

"I'd hardly call your city our natural environment," Kirk pointed out.

Huge wings struck at the air. "It was meant to be! That beautiful city and all else I taught to your ancestors were intended to be yours. But they became evil and forgetful and imposed their own teachings above mine until the greater was forgotten!"

There was nothing more to be gained by tact, Kirk decided. It was time to try directness. "We don't like being referred to as property," he said.

He was about fed up with this deranged mechanical wizard. To many primitive terran cultures he might well have seemed a god, but a god he was not.

"No one being," Kirk continued, "not even you, has the right to interfere with the natural development of other civilizations. This is a rule we have established for ourselves."

Huge linear muscles contracted; tightened. Wings beat furiously at cages and plants as the serpent flew into a frenzy, eyes bulging, mouth agape. They backed away from such naked rage.

"Do not speak to *me* of development and interference! Do not speak to me of what is *right!* I have been ever alone. Destruction descended on my kind before your race had discovered fire ... nay, before it learned to lift itself from the mud and walk upright. Is there 'right' in such endless solitude?"

He gestured at several nearby cages. One contained a creature much like an undernourished seal, the other a quivering mass of green and black protoplasm. Between lay xenariums filled with exotic flora.

"Creatures like these have been my only companions for many millennia. I have seen minds like yours on many worlds ... savage, warlike, filled with self-hate and destructive intelligence. You end by destroying yourselves and everything around you, by reducing whole planets to lifeless cinders. After endless encounters with such sickening civilizations I decided to" - the word came out savagely - "interfere! As a hopeful experiment I visited your Earth, among other worlds, and tried to teach peaceful ways to the now vanished cultures of many races.

"Then I left, intending when summoned to return to give you the additional knowledge which would enable you to join me as true equals. But you never sent for me. None did, to whom I gave the knowledge of the city. Finally I sent a probe to find out what had happened. What did it tell me, what did it discover? Warriors!" He spun rapidly in tight circles.

"Still warriors, ever warriors - the same as always. The same as I've seen on half a hundred worlds, only this time more terribly equipped than ever, with yet greater instruments of

destruction. You've surpassed the stage of quarreling among yourselves and have carried annihilation to the stars. You will end by destroying the universe!"

"Saints preserve us," murmured a flabbergasted Scott, "a paranoid god."

"But we work only to create peace," Walking Bear objected.

The serpent glared down at them, his shadow darkening the room, wings fluttering in agitation. "Nothing you have done so far makes me believe that is so. I - I have done better."

Again the broad, sweeping gesture, this time taking in the entire horizonless chamber: cages full of snaillike plants, plantlike snails, a cubicle lined with tiny colored balls, animals that resembled rocks, plants that resembled buildings, plant-animals like nothing on Earth.

"My creatures here have little intelligence, yet even the most violent among them exist peacefully in the worlds that I have to give."

Wings moved, and he backed around a corner. They followed cautiously to where an unusually large cage floated in midair. It held an enormous feline creature that was all teeth, fangs, and rasplike hair. Despite this fearsome array of inborn weaponry it was reposing quietly on a bed of grass, half-asleep. Even at rest, though, this carnivore generated a sense of menace greater than any dozen terran tigers on the hunt.

"Though one of the fiercest and most unmanageable monsters living in your region of space, this creature too lives in peace and contentment in the private paradise which I create for it out of its own dreams."

"Good Minerva," McCoy suddenly blurted, staring at the cage and taking a step backwards, "it's a Capalent power-cat. No one's ever been able to keep one alive in captivity."

"I'm not familiar with the species, Bones," Kirk said, eyeing the cage respectfully. "Why haven't they?"

"They despise captivity, have to be killed before they can do any major damage," McCoy explained. "Try to confine them and they fly into a blind rage. That rage is coupled to generating cells that make a big electric eel's kick look like a communicator battery next to a warp-drive. One can put out enough juice to turn alloy-netting into a tin puddle, or kill a couple of dozen overenthusiastic hunters."

He looked up at Kukulkan. "I've never heard of one living in captivity for more than a couple of days. How did you manage to capture it in the first place?"

"This one was an infant, when encountered," the serpent told them, "and therefore more easily manipulated. As you were when first I visited Earth. You were destructive children who needed to be led."

"But if children are made totally dependent on their teachers," Kirk put in quickly, "they'll never be anything but children."

Alien wings ripped at the air. "Enough! This is useless. Despite what I've told you, despite what you've seen, you persist in clinging to your disobedient ways." He swooped down to hover threateningly close.

"My dream is ending," he howled, "and all of you are to blame! No time," he continued with an ominous air of finality, "is ever given to those who must decide."

"Scatter!" Kirk yelled, reading Kukulkan's intentions in his tone. As the serpent dove at them the four officers did just that. The demigod hesitated, displaying something considerably short of omnipotence, trying to decide which of several ways to pursue first.

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The question of the alien's omnipotence was one which had been burning in another mind for some time now. When the solution finally presented itself to Spock it gave support to the theory that what is most obvious is most often overlooked.

"Of course," he finally murmured softly. The elasticity of the force-field should not be able to respond to assault from, more than a single source. If it could absorb and redistribute phaser beams, it shouldn't be possible for it to simultaneously cope with opposing pressure from another source.

As always, he triple-checked his supposition with actual math. The equations and conclusions which appeared on the library-computer screen confirmed his hopes.

He was speaking as he crossed to the empty command chair. "All hands to battle stations ... red alert is no longer on stand-by." Uhura complied and the fully activated triple shift readied for immediate action - all four hundred twenty-six of them.

"Full impulse power, Helmsman," he ordered in crisp tones as he settled himself in the chair. "Tractor beam on full power, warp-engines on stand-by."

A steady hum built on the Bridge as the closer impulse engine warmed.

"Tractor beam activated, sir," came the report from the engineering station.

"Very well. Set for maximum pull in precise opposition to our present heading."

"Aye, aye," came a ready but slightly confused voice.

"Mr. Arex, you are directed to compensate for catapult effect. When we break free of the confining force-field we will be thrown approximately five point seven light-years in a fraction of a second."

"Understood," the experienced navigator replied. Moments later he reported, "Catapult compensation factors laid in, sir. Gravity recoil compensation also checked."

"But how are we going to break free of the field?" Uhura wanted to know.

"This energy bubble, by its very nature, appears responsive to only one action per contained object, Lieutenant. If the same object - in this case, the *Enterprise* - both pushes and pulls on it simultaneously, at the same spot, the field should become sufficiently strained for a sudden burst of warp power to break clear of it.

"Mr. Sulu, Mr. Arex, you have our present spatial position?"

"Yes, sir," the double reply came. Spock wanted no chance of them being thrown nearly six light-years off with no way of relocating the alien's ship.

"Field contact with tractor beam in four seconds, sir," Arex announced. His voice was perhaps a twinge higher than usual.

Even as he finished, the *Enterprise*, in the person of its powerful tractor beam, once again encountered the restrictive surface of the force globe. Both tractor and impulse engine fought the same section of surface ... pushing and pulling toward the identical end.

Spock didn't intend that they should bear the terrific strain very long. For one thing the tractor mechanism would blow up if it was required to pull against the opposing force of the impulse engine for more than a couple of minutes.

"Full warp power on my order," Spock said, shaping the syllables slowly. "Now."

Within the force globe the tubular nacelles housing the great engines glowed brightly at the ends. The *Enterprise* hung in that nexus of antagonistic energies for a split second before a blinding white flash obliterated it from view.

Only a translucent blue globe remained.

In an empty, uncontested corner of space the flash was repeated for an audience of indifferent stars. The *Enterprise* appeared in its center. Kukulkan's ship was off the scanners.

No one raised a shout, there were no hysterical cheers. Those could wait until later, when the missing four crew members

had been rescued.

"All decks report no damage, no injuries, sir," Uhura announced.

"Mr. Sulu, come about. Mr. Arex, put us on course to return." Spock betrayed no hint of satisfaction. His tone was no different than it had been when they had seemed hopelessly trapped.

By interstellar standards the distance they had to travel was not great "Reduce speed to maximum close-range attack velocity, Mr. Sulu. Begin spiral attack pattern four. Arm all phasers and the photon torpedo banks."

"Sir," Sulu murmured, "if the Captain, Dr. McCoy and the others are still alive, wouldn't it be wise to...?"

"One of the hallmarks of wisdom is the assignment of priorities, Mr. Sulu. The *Enterprise* comes first. You will arm as directed."

"Yes, sir," came the flat response.

Thus prepared to deal a hurricane of destruction at the first attempt to encase them in another force-field, the *Enterprise* wound its way back toward the inimical ghost...

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Kirk was nearly exhausted. Just behind him, McCoy appeared to be in even worse shape. He glanced back and made a gesture. McCoy nodded in return. As they rounded the next suitable corner, both men dove behind one of the lowest of the suspended cages.

A writhing shape flashed by moments later, tongue flicking rapidly in all directions and red eyes glaring vengefully. Kirk marveled at the abilities of a race which could create technological wonders like this ship without the evolutionary benefit of manipulative members.

Surely those wings had always been wings, nor were there signs of rudimentary legs. The tail appeared reasonably prehensile, but that hardly seemed sufficient. Yet Kukulkan's people had managed, even triumphed, in matters of fine construction.

Even as he thought they had thrown off pursuit, bat-wings backed air and the twisting figure paused in mid-flight.

Kirk held his breath. He needn't have. It wasn't sudden detection of their presence that had brought Kukulkan to such an abrupt stop. Confusion of a different kind was apparent in his manner, and in the words he muttered unconsciously.

"Something is wrong."

Both officers hazarded a peek around the cage as the serpent made an elaborate gesture with both wings. A square of shimmering blackness materialized before him.

Looking into that was like peering into a cube of space. Miniature stars gleamed within it. Some were occluded by a miniature *Enterprise*.

And no force bubble encased it, Kirk noted excitedly.

The three-dimensional image of the ship grew larger and larger, until it seemed it would burst the confines of the cube.

"Escaped," Kukulkan was growling. "How? I will smash it this time..."

"Broken free, Jim!" McCoy exclaimed. "Spock..."

Kirk cut him off. "We've got to distract this thing and give him some time to get within range before another force bubble is projected - or worse." He started to draw back into the shadows, bumped something round and unyielding with his shoulder.

As the thought cleared he forgave himself the bruise. The exchange could be more than fair. "Bones, what would

happen if we were to pull the cables on some of these cages? Disrupt the peaceful environments?"

McCoy shrugged. "Probably most of the animals would just lie still. Those that weren't cowed would be too confused by the sudden change to know what to do. A few might react blindly..." A look of comprehension dawned on his face. "A few ... the Capalent power-cat!"

"Come on, Bones..."

Keeping to the shadows, of which there were precious few because of the even illumination, they traced an indirect path back to the cage holding the big carnivore.

That belligerent creature was awake now and calmly preening itself. As they neared the cage, Kirk found himself wondering if this was really such a brilliant idea. Yet what else could they try? It would take a major disturbance to draw Kukulkan's considerable mind away from the approach of the *Enterprise*.

Kirk carried out a last experiment by charging straight at the cage and slamming his hands hard against the transparent-seeming side. Within, the power-cat's gaze moved directly to him - and past.

They'd have a chance, then. Moving around the cage they started tugging and pulling at the twin cables. Despite their most strenuous efforts, the connections held fast.

Well behind their present location, Kukulkan hovered in humid air and studied the newly created image of the *Enterprise*. He appeared to hear something, his head suddenly lifting and turning in several directions before settling on one.

"No, stop!" he commanded angrily, with perhaps a touch of something other than anger in that shout. Wings flapping furiously, he streaked off down one winding path. Behind him, now devoid of control, the black cube of shrunken universe broke up into tiny puffs of dark smoke.

Kirk heard that shout. Holding tight to the cable just past where it joined the black box beneath the cage floor, he

tensed himself for a last, supreme effort.

He put his left foot up against the cage on one side of the cable, and shoved. Maintaining pressure, he brought his right leg off the ground and planted it on the other side of the link. Suspended off the ground, he strained shoulders and legs at the same time. McCoy struggled to imitate his actions.

Kirk's cable gave with a snap and tiny shower of sparks. He fell to the ground. Seconds later, McCoy joined him. The doctor was no athlete, but he knew exactly how to utilize the combination of bands and ropes that made up the muscular system.

Both men employed that system to roll beneath the only immediate cover - the dark bottom of the cage itself.

Above their heads, reaction was instantaneous. The power-cat jerked back from what must have been a shocking and radical alteration of the landscape.

Spinning, it saw more of the same. It shrank down into the earthen floor of the now fully transparent cage. But when no further metamorphosis followed, it rose rapidly to all fours. It could see other creatures moving about around it. Air still pulsed through its lungs, its heart still beat. It was alive.

There is practically nothing a Capalent power-cat fears. Whether panic or rage or both motivated it then, neither Kirk nor McCoy could tell.

It rose up on its hind legs, fur bristling, fangs bared. They couldn't hear the snarl it made, because it was drowned by a greater explosion. The interior of the cage was filled with a violent discharge of electricity that shattered the walls and ceiling of the enclosure into a thousand fragments.

They could hear the snarling now, uncomfortably close above them - a deep-throated, angry rasp that cut the air like a scythe. The power-cat leaped clear and began prowling among the surrounding cages, throwing off immense bursts of energy like a four-legged hairy thunderhead.

Random bolts struck the floor and ceiling of the chamber. Where they made contact, deep smoking scars in the material appeared. Other bursts shattered nearby cages, sending the respective inhabitants into quivering paralysis or leaping for the nearest shelter.

If anything, the rampaging killer's discharges seemed to increase in intensity. It reached the point where each new burst caused the color of the room to change. Kirk could feel the hair on his arms and the back of his neck stand on end in the presence of so much unchanneled power.

Kukulkan was close by, but he was no longer concerned with Kirk and McCoy, nor with Scott and Walking Bear who had hurried to the region of disturbance to offer aid if either captain or physician were in danger.

Wings fluttered in agitation as the serpent hissed, "Irrational savages! See what you have done!"

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"Prepare to fire, Mr. Sulu," Spock ordered calmly as the range to the ghost ship closed. "Aim for the propulsion units."

"Aye, sir."

They swept close ... and no force-field appeared to meet them. No duplicate of the pure white energy beam leaped to strike at their deflector shields.

"Fire, Mr. Sulu. Phasers first."

Twin beams of blue energy crossed the distance between ships. This time there was nothing to stop them. They raked the alien's drive.

"Again, Mr. Sulu." Once more the rear section of Kukulkan's vessel was hit.

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Within the life-room a brief turquoise glow touched everything. Then all was plunged into darkness in which the only light came from luminescent specimens and the intermittent blaze of the power-cat.

The carnivore's snarls reached them above an increasing melange of squeaks, chirps, moans and whistles. Kirk decided to take a chance, crawled clear of the protective cage. To the power-cat, his yell should be no more distracting than the calls of any other freed creatures.

"Kukulkan! You can't control one of your *own* creatures!" The emphasis on the *own* was intentional, but the irony was wasted on that monumental reptilian ego.

Light returned to the chamber and Kirk ducked back out of sight. But this wasn't the bright, powerful illumination of before. It was dim and flickered dimmer at random moments. It was strong enough for them to see by with reasonable ease, though.

Kukulkan had made no attempt to locate the source of that taunt. Instead, he was shrinking back against one smoking cage as the odor of crisped air drifted back to them. Both cat and prey were edging toward their hiding place.

"I cannot, any longer. Your ship has crippled my central power source."

Kirk was about to say something about the power of a god, but McCoy had grabbed his arm. "If that's true, Jim, then that cat's a real threat to all of us."

A snarl sounded close by, and a moment later Kukulkan appeared. The power-cat had its head down and was stalking the serpent-god with single-minded hatred. It was backing Kukulkan in against a shattered cage that reached nearly to the ceiling. Its tail lashed back and forth and blue sparks danced on its fur. Ozone stank in their nostrils.

"We've got to do something, Jim, it'll be after us next."

"Your medikit, Bones - maximum tranquilizer setting for alien mammaloids."

McCoy was fumbling at his kit instantly, muttering. "We're not certain it's a mammal, Jim. Power-cat study's not a favorite subject among researchers on Capalent. I don't even know if the hypo will penetrate."

"It better," Kirk warned nervously.

McCoy drained nearly all of one vial to fill the hypo, then slapped it into Kirk's ready palm like a relay runner's baton. Kirk was already dashing from their hiding place before the doctor could think to object.

Kukulkan was lashing his tail like a whip and beating with its wings. The power-cat was not impressed. If the serpent tried to dodge, the cat would cut him off to either side ... and there wasn't enough room to fly over the towering cage. Escape was impossible.

Powerful leg muscles tightened and the carnivore's tail twitched faster. It was readying itself to spring, eyes fixed on the brightly-colored creature which hovered before it. One might think the position of deity and mortal had been reversed.

So intent was it upon Kukulkan that the power-cat never saw Kirk. The captain brandished the hypo like a knife and slammed it into the carnivore's rear right hip.

It whirled immediately, as much startled as angered. The burst of electricity it threw off was reflexive rather than directed. That saved Kirk's life. The discharge was still powerful enough to send him flying into a nearby tangle of uncaged shrubs.

Apparently unhurt, the cat readied itself to hurl a better-aimed charge at this tiny new opponent. Instead, it shook its head and got down off its hind legs, eyes blinking slowly.

Behind it, Kukulkan's agitation diminished. The god cocked his head quizzically as he evaluated the change in the now dazed

killer. Its gaze rose to study the place where Kirk lay.

McCoy was at the captain's side in a moment, but Kirk was evidently all right. He was sitting up, shaking his head and rubbing at his right shoulder. The doctor's voice was still concerned.

"Did you inject the beast or yourself? You look a little rocky, Jim."

"I'm okay, Bones. That last bolt just singed me. Funny stuff, lightning. It can turn a hundred-meter-tall tree into lawn stakes without harming someone standing nearby." He gestured with his head to where a long black streak had scorched the deck just to one side of where he'd been, seconds before.

Okay or not, he didn't object when McCoy offered him a hand up. The narrowness of his escape was magnified when a few steps brought them to the hypo. It had been thrown clear. It was recognizable as the hypo only because it couldn't be anything else. Metal and glass were fused into a vaguely cylindrical blob of still hot slag.

Kukulkan, meanwhile, had recovered enough to hover above the power-cat. Kirk considered running for their hiding place, then shrugged. They'd already been seen and anyway, with the power-cat immobilized, the serpent could locate them at its leisure.

McCoy joined him as he walked toward the carnivore. The huge creature was not unconscious. It possessed physical reserves which could almost handle even the massive dose it had been injected with. It sat swaying slightly and licking its forepaws.

"What a system!" McCoy murmured in admiration. "That hypo had enough mynoquintistrycnite in it to knock out a herd of hippos."

"It's just like a big kitten," a voice sounded behind them. Walking Bear, and Scott with him. The first animal they had seen, the lumbering platypus-like thing, was waddling behind

Scott. Every once in a while it would sidle up next to him and rub up and down his leg like a big slick dog, uttering a peculiar gulping sound.

Scott would hesitate, then reach down to scratch behind its ears. "What's this, again? Aren't you the friendly little darlin'."

"Hello Walking Bear, Scotty," Kirk hailed.

"I see things have calmed down a bit, Captain," Scott observed with satisfaction, staring past him. "Maybe now all concerned parties can discuss things a bit more sensibly."

"Yes," Kirk agreed, turning to face Kukulkan. "I think we've earned the right to be heard."

"You continue to take advantage of me," the serpent replied grudgingly. "Yet my beamed request for time will not delay your Mr. Spock much longer. He would destroy my ship. Therefore I must consent. Speak what you will."

Kirk nodded back to where Scott was still scratching the alien platypus. The eyes of the creature were closed in apparent pleasure.

"You think of us as being weak, small creatures like that one, as unintelligent animals. Are we truly that inferior to you?" Kukulkan paused, seeming for the first time to consider his reply before speaking.

"Potentially, mentally ... no. But compared to the violence of your kind, the power-cat in its natural state is docility personified. How can I let that live to poison an unsuspecting universe?"

McCoy's hands were locked behind his back: He was rocking slowly on his heels and staring expectantly at Kirk. Obviously the good doctor was burning to say something. Kirk saw no reason to stand in his way.

"We'd be fools if we didn't learn from our own history," McCoy began. "Those minds you admit aren't so inferior to yours ... we've been using them since you last visited us. Don't let your

probe's tales of warships and arms convince you we're about to embark on a Galaxywide war of extermination. We've been working to bring about a multiracial civilization in which everyone can live in peace with his neighbors. We've already accomplished this within our own Federation." He grinned. "A few persistent throwbacks like the Klingons and Romulans will come around, in time."

"You see why we can't be what you originally intended for us," Kirk continued. "If we fail or succeed, it has to be - must be - by our own hands. By our own doing.

"You could probably find your worshipful servant races somewhere, Kukulkan, but they'd have to be blind and dumb. Once you have a being with a mind of its own, you can no longer lead it around by the nose. You cannot have intelligent slaves, Kukulkan. The thing is as impossible as a leisurely cruise past a black hole."

Kirk didn't think it was possible for that cobra countenance to look downcast, but Kukulkan managed it.

"I thought of you as my children. I hoped I could teach you, lead you, aid you. There is much I can..."

"You already have," Kirk said, with more compassion than he believed he could muster for this overbearing creature. "Long ago, when it was needed most - when our ancestors were still children. But we're all grown up now, Kukulkan."

He hesitated, then added as gently as possible, "We don't need you anymore."

This time the serpent spoke with true somberness. "It seems I have already done what I can, and things cannot be as I wished them. Therefore ... I will let you go your own way, as you wish." The power-cat had ceased licking itself and now lay down peacefully between them.

"We would still have you as a friend and equal, Kukulkan," Kirk offered.

"No ... no." The wings beat slowly. "That cannot be, now, for me. As you cannot be servants, and children, so can I be no less than the master. It is sad, but it is truth.

"Go now..."

***

Kirk studied the viewscreen. Kukulkan's ship still hovered there, but its awesome energy cloak was gone. The need for deception had passed.

McCoy stood nearby while Spock was watching the screen from his position at the library-computer station.

"An interesting experience," the first officer observed.

"Interesting," McCoy mumbled, in a tone that indicated he would have used other adjectives to describe what they had just been through.

"Our visitor turned out to be the actual Mayan god," Spock concluded.

"And the Toltecs' Quetzalcoatl," Walking Bear reminded, "and the original Chinese dragon, and all the rest."

"But not quite a god," Kirk corrected them. "Just an old, lonely being who wanted to help others - an ego-maniacal hermit who'd chose isolation before confessing to his mortality."

McCoy grinned and crossed his arms, rather like a gunfighter preparing for a standoff - only the doctor was readying a verbal salvo.

"Spock," he began innocently, "I don't suppose Vulcans have legends like those?"

The first officer regarded him evenly, raised one eyebrow. "Not legends, Doctor. Vulcan *was* visited by alien beings in its past. They, however, left us much wiser."

McCoy was preparing a reply when Arex, who had insisted on remaining on duty until the incident was finally resolved, broke in with a report.

"The other vessel is getting under way, sir, heading directly outward along the transmission heading."

"Away from Earth, away from the Federation," Kirk confirmed, watching as Kukulkan's ship began to shrink on the screen. "It's sad. Think what we could do with the knowledge on that ship, held in that mind." He shook his head.

"Unfortunately, the price was just too high."

"I think I know how he felt, Jim," McCoy commented, turning suddenly serious. Spock also turned to look at him. "There's a line from Shakespeare..."

"I remember it, too, Bones." Kirk's voice recited, "'How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child'."

"Indeed, Captain," Spock agreed, filling that terse comment with more meaning than most people could put in several paragraphs.

Kirk sighed, looked back at the screen. It was empty again, empty save for that endless panoply of marching suns. They glowed mockingly back at him, each holding secrets they stubbornly guarded with distance and time.

"Lay in a course for Starbase 21, Mr. Arex. All ahead warp-three..."

THE COUNTER-CLOCK INCIDENT

(Adapted from a script by John Culver)

I

A warm light seemed to suffuse April's face as he stared at the drawings. Soft, caressing, intense—the kind of gentle radiance Rembrandt used to edge his portraits with.

The works hanging on the wall before him, which had inspired such a reverent gaze, would never hang in any museum, would never raise the brow of the lowliest art critic. Yet April's mind applied a critic's terminology to them. Masterpieces—exquisite, sensuous, drawn with unsurpassed skill and vivid realization—they were.

True, the drawings had no depth beyond the minimally necessary. There was no attempt to give body to the colossal conception so skeletally sketched. The use of color was minimal, every drawing done in unrelieved blue on white.

But that didn't matter. His mind filled in the myriad colors that would be added later.

"Magnificent, isn't she?" the old man standing on April's left murmured. "Even in the preliminary blueprints. The soundness of Franz Joseph's original design holds up well. You know, there was a time when people thought he designed these ships only for amusement, that they'd never have any practical application."

"Hard to believe," April agreed. "Still, they were well ahead of their time." He peered harder at the wall full of drawings. "NCC-1701, Class One . . . that's a heavy cruiser, right?"

"Sure is," Commodore van Anling admitted. "Her major components are being put together out in the San Francisco yards right now. I could take you out there, but"—he nodded toward the wall—"there's much more to be seen in those prints than in a few irregular masses of metal and plastic. Free-space assembly won't begin for another eight months yet."

"I see." April turned to the smaller, deceptively frail-looking man. "But why tell me all this, sir? Why call me away from my

regular duties?" The light in his eyes deepened to an expectant gleam. "Am I going to be assigned to her?"

The commodore nodded, unable to suppress a slight smile.

April's voice rose like a small boy's. "What section, sir? If you have any idea, if it wouldn't be against regulations to tell me . . .!"

"I do and it isn't," van Anling told him, moving to a chair facing the wall.

"Engineering?" April prompted.

"No."

"Communications, then? Surely communications." The commodore shook his head. "Sciences . . . a security post?"

"No . . . no." Under the pencil-thin white mustache the older officer cracked an irrepressible grin.

"For heaven's sake, sir, give me to the Klingons, send me up for disobedience . . . but *tell* me! I've got to restudy whatever section it is, got to prepare . . ."

"You sure do," van Anling informed him somberly, "because you're going to be in all of them." At April's blank stare, he added, "Because she's going to be your ship . . . *Captain* April."

"My . . . ship?"

"You're going to be her captain . . . her first captain," the commodore continued. April eyed him uncertainly, but there was no tag to the incredible pronouncement. Therefore it had to be true.

Slowly April turned, to stare anew at the wall filled with diagrams and blueprints. His gaze traveled from one to another, but all at once the regular lines seemed wavy, the precision gone. Lines clashed crazily, ran blindly into adjoining ones. The gleam in his eyes was gone, replaced suddenly by signs of another emotion.

Fear. Fear and a thrill so overwhelming he felt as though the combination would shove his heart right out through his chest. All of a sudden Robert April was the happiest man in the world . . . and he was scared to death.

"I . . . I'm not ready for this, sir," he finally managed to confess.

"That's all right," van Anling replied benignly. "You've got a whole year to make yourself ready. Better get to it, son."

In the harsh, gray shadows of the moon, beneath hills of devastated ash and pumice, an unlimited-range, high-resolution navigational computer finished digesting a gigantic body of minutiae. The results of many days of intense electronic cogitation were regurgitated in the form of a tiny printout on an insignificant little shard of tape.

The tape was carefully routed from the computer processor through an intermediary to the person in charge of the installation, who then relayed it to the captain of the small vessel resting in orbit high above the station. The captain passed it on, together with the requisite orders, to his own navigator. That worthy conferred with his two associates—one mechanical, the other only partly so.

The thing, he explained, would have to be aligned so and so at a speed of such and such, to achieve the optimum eventual impact. From time to time the ship's gunnery officer nodded knowingly or added a comment or correction of his own. Eventually everyone agreed. The results of the discussion were transmitted to the captain, who gave his approval and issued the formal order, which the gunnery officer executed.

Although the projector mounted on the small ship looked unimpressive, its efficiency was astounding. There was no flash, no concussive aftershock, no rumbling boom, of course, but the projector did its job nonetheless. Sensors immediately took over, announcing unemotionally that the projectile was on course at the proper speed. It would reach its target in approximately two weeks, four days, sixteen hours and assorted minutes.

The captain of the small ship eyed the tiny blip until it had faded completely from the sensitive tracking screen. More than anything else, he wished he could be there when the projectile impacted on its target. Destiny, however, had ordered more mundane activities for him on that distant day. He sighed. If he were lucky, they might be able to pick up the results on the tracking monitors—if they were still in the area.

Construction of the battle cruiser was proceeding smoothly. More smoothly, in fact, than had the construction of any similar vessel in some time. Possibly the Vulcan foreman had something to do with it. But whether through causes superhuman or supernatural, it began to be whispered among the construction crew and Starfleet personnel that this was going to be an especially blessed ship, a lucky ship . . .

The projectile possessed no power units of its own. It had no sensing equipment, no detectors, no screens—nothing that could be sensed by any type of sophisticated energy-detection equipment. There was nothing to spoil the eventual surprise of its arrival, and it had to be perfectly aligned when fired. Divergence of even a hundredth of a degree could cause it to miss its intended target entirely. So its planners, both electronic and human, had been careful. It held to its course and flew silently on its way.

The United Federation of Planets Starfleet assembly station swung in majestic orbit around Earth. It resembled a bombed toy factory.

Gigantic preassembled sections of ships were boosted to this spot from half a hundred points on Earth's surface; special components from as many more deep-space cargo containers were unloaded. Thousands of elements were manufactured nearby, in dozens of enormous drifting factories, their production facilitated by zero gravity and total vacuum. Each of several million parts had to fit into sisters and brothers within a thousandth of a millimeter. Humanoid minds had conceived the project, but none of it would have been possible without the aid of machines.

One section was devoted to assembling two massive warp-drive engines. Construction crews working in triple shifts seamed the yawning sections together, work continuing around the clock.

An unusual pause in the work rhythm accompanied the placing of shielding from Tashkent. Assembly totally halted as the second-shift engineer-in-charge slowly turned his flexible armored worksuit to face the glowing Earth below. He

arranged his suit carefully, moving the upper part in a particular way. His motions were directed toward a distant point on the planet's surface. They were as accurate as he could make them without benefit of detailed instrumentation. A slight divergence would not matter. His thoughts exceeded the actual movements in importance.

He quickly resumed directing the shielding installation. Below, Mecca had rotated past, turning majestically with the rest of the world.

In bits and pieces the huge ship began to form, sections of a white puzzle taking shape against a chill black background. Each crew, each shift, prided itself on being more accurate than its predecessor. Every coterie of seamers drifted on tethers and tried to outdo its counterparts for smoothness of joining and accuracy of component integration. The technicians and constructors and fabricators who set the lanes for the ship's bowling alley in place did their job with no less care and finesse than did the cybernetics crew responsible for locking the central computer into the ganglion of electronic nerves which stretched the length and breadth of the steadily maturing ship.

While construction proceeded with remarkable speed and efficiency, a tiny projectile continued toward a preselected point in space.

Eventually the day came when no more massive boosters lifted from the Earth's surface. No components required a last recheck; every bit of instrumentation had been certified operational. Everything was in place, from photon torpedoes to potted philodendrons.

Several thousand strong, the construction crews began to assemble around the finished ship. Individuals in worksuits drifted in, as did crews of two or three manning engineering lighters—several hundred looking on from the orbital assembly stations that boxed in the construction area. All looked on as the first crew finally took official possession of their ship.

The engineering staff alone did not proceed at once to assigned quarters. Starship engineers seldom used their on-board personal cabins. They lived in jeffries tubes and

cramped accessways and in the free spaces between computer housings.

April barely had time to check out the glistening chronometer in his quarters. Luxuriating in the comparative spaciousness of the captain's cabin would have to wait. He had a ship to command.

It was a short turbolift ride to the bridge. His first-shift officers awaited him there. Slowly, appraisingly, he looked them over one at a time. Were they all as nervous as he was, he wondered? Some had had more time in Starfleet than he did, albeit in noncommand ratings. Did any of them feel the same overpowering mix of fear and exultation, terror and expectancy, that had been building in him since that day the commodore had shown him this ship, at the time only a smattering of diagrams spread on a wall outside the San Francisco naval yard?

To April's relief, it was First Officer Shundresh who smoothly broke the silence.

"Ready to get under way, Captain."

"Very well, Mr. Shundresh. All stations stand by."

Suddenly his fear was gone, replaced by a strange calmness. It all seemed so natural somehow, as if he had been doing this for years. Walking forward, he assumed his position in the command chair. His body melted easily into the deceptively blunt contours. The chair was comforting beyond imagination, in a way that bordered on the erotic.

Leaning over, April pressed the proper button and spoke with a reassurance that sprang from just-tapped regions. "Engineering?"

"Chief Engineer Kursley," the thick voice filtered back. "Standing by for orders, sir."

"Activate warp-drive engines, Chief."

"Activating warp-drive, Captain." Kursley turned to the prime engineering board. She eyed her subordinates, then muttered a silent liturgy. It might have been a prayer, might have been something else. She engaged the energies of a sun.

Hitherto quiescent monitors awoke on the bridge. Blank-eyed circlets winked on, needles sprinted ahead, bands

ascended on gauges, and a tiny shock ran through every member of the bridge crew.

"All systems," April ordered firmly, "final checkout. Report."

Response came from around the bridge, from speakers at the freshly painted communications station, and finally from Navigation.

"Visual contact, sir. Object approaching on collision course, bearing dead ahead."

"Acknowledged, Lieutenant Po." April addressed the general intercom. "All hands, stand by."

Other, distant hands were standing by in a small room beneath the lunar surface. Other eyes checked chronometers and predictors as they watched the distant Earth-ball, fighting to find a minute speck outlined against that brilliant blue-white globe. The drama begun on a small stage several weeks before was approaching the final curtain.

"Contact in thirty seconds, Captain," Lieutenant Po reported, with an irrepressible shiver of excitement.

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

In suits and ships and stations, thousands of men and women of several races watched their fully formed offspring and waited expectantly.

"Four . . . three . . ." the navigator counted off tensely, "two . . . one . . . interdiction . . ."

Head-on, the tiny projectile struck the completed cruiser, exploded, and burst into a small but rapidly expanding ball of brilliance. Tiny reflective fragments caught the morning sunlight and turned the diffusing globe into a spray of diamonds.

Thousands of watching eyes saw the distant explosion and reacted. From electronic pickups set strategically around the assembly area, billions more on Earth and on other globes also saw it—and all reacted.

On billions of speakers, the aged but enormously respected voice of the Federation president, Samuel Solomon Qasr, sounded from a chamber on the moon: "In the name of the United Federation of Planets, for the United Nations of Earth, the Planetary Confederation of Forty Eridani, the United

Planets of Sixty-one Cygni, the Star Empire of Epsilon Indii, the Alpha Centauri Concordium of Planets, and all other peace-loving, space-going peoples, I christen thee *Enterprise*!"

Those on board the just-commissioned ship heard those words, but not the cheering of the construction crews gathered around them, or the comments and smiles and expressions of satisfaction on the world below. Though each crew member might have permitted himself a silent observation, of varying content and intensity, these were not voiced aloud.

There was too much to do now.

The Federation Exploration Territory was enormous beyond comprehension, and it was but a minuscule portion of this tiny section of the galaxy. Battle cruisers were too expensive, their personnel too valuable to be tied up on anything as wasteful as a shakedown cruise.

It seemed there was a certain world on the present fringe of Federation expansion which desperately required the know-how and capabilities of a major-class vessel. April had his orders. The initial cruise of the *Enterprise* would be fully operational.

Ceremony concluded, April leaned back in his chair, already a part of him, and called firmly to his helmsman.

"Ahead warp-factor three, Lieutenant Nobis."

It was four decades, forty long years since he had given that first order, April thought. He was still on the bridge of the *Enterprise*, only this day and this place in time he found himself behind the captain's chair, instead of sitting in it.

Still odd, he mused to himself. Odd to be standing here, staring at the familiar—and always overpowering—panorama of stars depicted on the viewscreen ahead and listening to someone else making the entry into the official log.

"Captain's log," the voice was saying, "Stardate 5536.3. The *Enterprise* is on course to the planet Babel, where an inter-Federation ambassadorial gathering is scheduled. Highlight of the conference is to be a ceremony honoring the *Enterprise*'s distinguished passenger."

Kirk paused and glanced behind him to see April still staring quietly at the main screen. The commodore's mind appeared to be elsewhere, but his eyes sparkled as he stared intently at the perfectly ordinary starfield ahead. There was an enthusiasm there that was often absent in officers a third his age. The superstructure might be aged and wrinkled, but Kirk knew the mind it housed was as keen and fascinated with the universe as ever.

Every so often Uhura, Arex, or Sulu would steal a surreptitious glance at their honored guest when they were sure no one was looking. Kirk smiled. A little hero worship would not affect ship efficiency. Besides, he had to admit he wasn't wholly immune to it himself. He turned his attention back to the log. After all, it wasn't every day one had a living legend for an after-dinner chess partner.

"Commodore Robert April," Kirk continued recording, "was the first captain of the U.S.S. *Enterprise* and, for the past twenty years, the Federation ambassador-at-large. Now seventy-five years old, Commodore April has reached mandatory retirement age." Kirk pressed one switch, activated another.

"Captain's log, supplemental to entry of 5536.3. Said retirement age being a bureaucratic aberration—arbitrarily decided on by a cluster of smug civil servants without regard to individual capability or overall Starfleet efficiency—and a regulation badly in need of overhaul." He clicked off.

"Nice of you to add that, Jim," April approved in soft, almost small-boy tones. "Do you really think anyone will ever pay any attention to it?"

Kirk shook his head. "They had to pick a number, Commodore. How they arrived at seventy-five for everyone human is something I'll never understand. Instead of basing the figure on individual ability and performance, they simply —"

April cut him off smoothly, soothingly. "Oh well. If they didn't have a number, Jim, then there'd be a blank spot on a form some place. And you know what *that* would mean."

Kirk grumbled sarcastically. "The end of Starfleet, I suppose."

"That is hardly likely, Captain. Nor is it logical," Spock observed from across the bridge.

"I guess not, Mr. Spock, but neither is the mandatory retirement setup."

"I never claimed it was, Captain. On Vulcan such things are determined with rather more regard to reason."

"Perhaps it will all change in Starfleet someday, Mr. Spock," April mused hopefully. "Too late for me, I'm afraid." He turned his gaze forward again and was silent for a minute.

"You know, no matter where I've traveled through this galaxy, Jim, this bridge is more home to me than anywhere else. I can't count the number of times these past twenty years when I've turned to give an order to someone and found myself seated across from some utterly bemused diplomat I was negotiating with. It's a wonder I accomplished anything for the Federation." He chuckled. "Most diplomats don't take orders very well—or even suggestions."

"Probably intentional," Kirk observed. "If every one of you behaved reasonably and intelligently at all times, why then all our problems would be quickly solved, and you'd all be out of a job. No more diplomatic corps." April smiled knowingly.

"But as far as this bridge being home," Kirk continued, "yes, I know the feeling myself, Commodore."

"The *Enterprise* has always been like my own child, in a way," April went on. "I was there in San Francisco when her basic components were being built. I consulted with her chief construction engineer, Franz Joseph IV, on her internal configuration. I was present at the orbital assembly plant when they put her innards together.

"When they tested out each newly installed component, whether warp-drive or swimming pool, I was there. The additions and modifications she's taken since are good ones. A ship-of-the-line has to be kept up to date, but . . ." He shrugged. "I miss some of the old-fashioned touches."

"Nostalgia is notoriously inefficient," Spock commented, but so softly no one could hear. He knew an emotional observation when he heard one.

The elevator doors parted to admit Dr. McCoy. He was accompanied by an attractive little woman who projected an

air of supreme self-confidence and contentment. Her attire was current high fashion, all emerald green and black and bearing no relationship to Starfleet uniforms. Gray hair, unabashedly untouched, was done up in long taffy like swirls and twists. Even the single flower she carried seemed designed only to complement her. The colorful blossom had petals that wound in and about themselves in an intricate, delicately engineered manner.

The last person in the room she resembled was her husband. Only one thing, besides age, linked them inseparably—both wore that same aura of composure and confidence like a coat of jewels.

For his part, Dr. McCoy wore his standard on-duty uniform and an air of what could best be described as bemused pleasure.

"Jim," he began admiringly, "I didn't realize until now how many of the instruments I use in Sick Bay were originally designed and first used by Sarah. Did you know that she cribbed the first version of the standard cancer monitor together out of some old medical components and phaser-monitor units?"

The woman smiled demurely. "As the first medical officer aboard a ship equipped with warp-drive, it was always necessary for us to come up with new ideas."

"Your modesty is unnecessary, Ms. April," Kirk observed honestly. "Your achievements as a pioneer Starfleet physician are well known and extensively documented. There are many doctors who cannot do what a medical engineer does, and a corresponding number of medical engineers who are ill-prepared to administer treatment. You're one of the few people in Starfleet medicine who ever managed to master the requirements of both professions."

"And it's nice to know," McCoy added, "that the doctor is as beautiful as she is accomplished. A beauty that's reflected by the flower she carries."

"If your medical ability is as accomplished as your flattery, Dr. McCoy, then I know Captain Kirk has no worries in that area of *Enterprise* operations. I won't be impolite and ask if that's a quote—I'll assume you made it up on the spur of the moment." She smiled a youngish smile. "Please feel free to

insert such comments wherever you think they fit into the conversation."

Her smile faded as she looked down at the delicate growth in her hands. "I'm afraid, though, that my flower is dying."

So many references to the flower prompted Kirk to turn to get a better look at it. "Let's see . . . botanical text, the Reddin catalog . . . volume six, which sector . . .?" Mumbling to himself, he thumbed the text. He located it quickly. "A native of Capella Four, isn't it?"

She nodded. "The mature blossom has a lifespan of only a few hours. If you recognize it, Captain, you'll recall how brief the growing period is on that world.

"This is an extreme example even for Capella Four, I'm told. When it was given to me this morning it was a bud barely out of seed. Within a few hours it will be dead." She paused. "It's one of the most beautiful growths in the galaxy, and one of the shortest-lived. What a pity." She looked up. "I know people like that, too, Captain."

"Excuse me, sir," Spock said in the ensuing silence. "You asked to be notified when we made visual contact with the Beta Niobe Nova."

"Yes . . . thank you, Mr. Spock." Kirk glanced backward. "Ms. April, you're about to see another of the galaxy's most beautiful—and, in astronomical terms, short-lived-sights. Its remnants, though, will last a lot longer than the petals of your flower. The Beta Niobe Nova. Mr. Spock?"

"A moment, Captain, some precision focusing is required." They waited while the first officer made final adjustments at his console. The forward viewscreen blurred, then cleared, to show a monstrous eruption in space, an explosion of primal energy, of raw power—and only incidentally of blazing color.

Yellow and white gases, mutilated matter, glowed at its heart, while at its edges erratic and undisciplined streamers of brilliant red and orange charged blindly into indifferent emptiness. In this isolated section of space, the depressing darkness of the universe was suffused with wild color and wilder energies.

"Magnificent," Sarah April gushed.

"Magnificent and deadly," Spock echoed, "but we are traveling at a safe distance from the nova, Ms. April."

"Beta Niobe, Niobe . . . I've heard that name in connection with the *Enterprise* before." She looked up at the commodore. "Bob, didn't you read me a report some years ago . . .?"

"Yes . . . you were present when the star first exploded, weren't you, Jim?" he asked.

"We were, Commodore," Kirk replied. "I wasn't aware that in addition to handling all your duties and activities as ambassador-at-large you managed to keep track of such trivia as our day-to-day operations."

April looked at once flattered and embarrassed. "It's not trivia to me, Jim. A part of me will always be on this ship, and the rest of me is intensely interested in what happens to it. Some of your reports to Starfleet headquarters read as anything but uninteresting trivia. As you know, your ship's log is always available to me—a courtesy Starfleet extends to former starship captains. I know what's happening aboard the *Enterprise* as soon as headquarters does.

"If I recall this particular report correctly, you were trapped in a planet's past, about to be tried as a witch just before this star started to go nova."

Kirk nodded. "One of our narrower escapes. For Dr. McCoy and Mr. Spock as well as for me."

"I'll say it was narrow!" McCoy added fervently. "I was trapped in that world's ice age at the time. The only other time in my life I've ever been that cold was when our computer went berserk a little while back and turned the Recreation Chamber into subarctic snowpack."

"Captain . . .?" A hesitant query from the region of the helm. Kirk looked over absently.

"What is it, Mr. Sulu? Important?"

"I don't know, sir." He looked puzzled. "I've got something moving toward us, at extreme range right now."

Kirk swiveled. "Mr. Spock?"

"No basis for identification as yet, Captain," the first officer replied, staring into the gooseneck viewer. "Vessel is no longer at extreme range, however."

Now it was Kirk's turn to appear confused. "That was a quick change. Are you sure, Spock?"

Both curved eyebrows sank as Spock analyzed several readouts at once. "Captain, the object is traveling at a speed nothing short of incredible. Presently on collision course with the *Enterprise*."

Kirk didn't hesitate. "Sound red alert, Lieutenant Uhura. 'Nothing short of incredible' doesn't tell me much, Spock. Spock?"

Crimson warning lights blinked on, accompanied by the appropriate aural blarings.

"Excuse me, Captain," the first officer finally muttered. "You'll have to ascribe my hesitation to sheer incredulity. This object is traveling at a rate theoretically impossible for matter to achieve.

"More specifically—bear in mind I have to override the standard settings, Captain—it is moving at a speed on the order of warp-thirty-six."

The numbers cut through Kirk like a scalpel. "You're right," he finally confessed, "it *is* impossible. Mr. Spock, nothing can travel that fast."

"I fear, Captain, that in this case you must redefine that observation. It is nothing, less one."

"No natural object," April put in, "has ever been recorded as traveling at that speed—or at anything close to it."

"Preliminary sensor reports, Captain," Spock continued, "lead me to an even more astonishing conclusion." He looked up from his instruments. "The object is an artificial construct. I *must* assume it is some kind of ship."

Kirk pondered the information. When he spoke again, his voice was unconsciously hushed. "Who has the technology to build a vessel that can move at that velocity?"

"Obviously, no known race, Captain," Spock pointed out. "Impossible or not, it will make contact with us in one point four minutes."

There was nothing theoretical about the order Kirk gave them. "Hard over, helmsman, change course to a new heading, two full degrees to starboard."

Even as he gave the order he knew that if this ridiculously rapid visitor turned out to be inimical, there was no way they could dodge or outrun it.

The same thought evidently was running through his first officer's mind, because a second later Spock commented, "It is apparently nonbelligerent, Captain. It appears a collision was not intended, as the vessel has not altered its course to match ours.

"If it continues in its present direction, it will plunge directly into the center of the Beta Niobe Nova."

Was that it, then, Kirk thought quickly—a hurried rush to extinction, to suicide? Or was an unknown crew injured, its ship damaged?

"Lieutenant Uhura," he called over his shoulder, "open hailing frequencies. I want to talk to that ship's captain—if it has one."

A long pause while Uhura worked at her console. Finally she turned, spoke discouragingly. "I'm sorry, Captain. I've sent everything in its direction except carrier pigeons. If there's anyone on board capable of responding, they've elected not to."

Kirk pondered. "Have you tried all the emergency frequencies, Lieutenant?"

"Sir, I've broadcast on every possible frequency for every listed race, and a few that are only hypothetical. No response."

"Vessel is nearing a parallel course, Captain," Sulu reported uneasily—uneasily because their brief course change was now taking them toward the raging nova instead of past it.

"Increase speed to warp-seven, Mr. Sulu, try to stay with it as much as possible."

"Aye, sir."

"Despite our best efforts, the alien vessel will shoot past us very shortly, Captain," Spock declared.

"I realize that, Spock." His voice dropped to a murmur. "It may be that they can't communicate—maybe their communications equipment's been damaged. Perhaps the entire crew is injured. We've got to find out, somehow."

"It'll have to be soon, sir," Sulu noted. "She'll go right out of range as soon as she parallels us."

"Then we'll have to slow her down. Mr. Sulu, put our forward tractor beam on that ship as soon as it comes within range. Full power."

"Is that advisable, Captain?" Spock wondered aloud.

"It's more advisable than letting a possibly friendly crew burn to a crisp in the nova, Mr. Spock. If I were injured and aboard that vessel, I'd want any stranger to lend a hand. If they know what they're doing and insist on committing suicide . . . well, let's evaluate that possibility last of all."

"It is not that, Captain," Spock protested. "I agree with you completely on the possibility that the crew may be incapacitated or that their broadcast instrumentation is damaged beyond use. If that is the case, then naturally we must do everything in our power to aid them. My worry is that we may overextend ourselves in doing so. I am particularly concerned about the aftereffects of locking a tractor beam on an object moving at such a velocity. To understate the matter, there could be severe physical repercussions. Such a thing has never been tried before."

"Naturally not, Mr. Spock, the opportunity never arose before. It'll be history in a few seconds, whatever the result. Mr. Sulu?"

"Forward tractor beam energized, Captain." A pause; then, "Contact achieved . . . locked on."

"Any effect?"

"Sir," Sulu responded after a quick check of his readouts, "I'm running it at maximum power, but the alien is still moving on the same course."

"Tractor beam monitors report no damage to components or tractor bracing," Spock reported evenly. "No sign of dangerous stress apparent yet."

It was Arex's turn to speak up. The quiet navigator made his first comment on the proceedings. "We are apparently having some effect on the vessel's mobility, Captain, if not its course. Using the parameters employed by Mr. Spock, it would appear that the other ship's speed has dropped to the equivalent of warp-twenty-seven."

"Darn well froze it in its tracks," Kirk muttered. "That's *some* ship."

That was when Uhura's excited voice commanded all the attention on the bridge.

"Captain, we're being beamed!"

II

"I can't be certain—the message is terribly scrambled, and like nothing I've ever seen before—but I *think* it's a request to open intership communications," Uhura declared.

"So much for the disability and damage theory," Kirk observed tautly. "That means they're probably healthy—just antisocial. Switch on the screen, Uhura."

The communications officer appeared to be struggling with her instrumentation, but eventually the view of the grand nova vanished. It was replaced by a portrait of a more composed subject, but one in its own way no less fascinating.

As usual, Kirk awaited this first view of an unknown race without preconceived imagery. Even so, the first sight of a representative of supreme warp-drive technology was at once disappointing and shocking. Disappointing because its manipulator was no wizened alien genius, and shocking because the reality tended to the other extreme. In fact, the young woman who appeared on the screen was so human that she could have traded uniforms with Uhura or any of the *Enterprise*'s female complement and moved freely about the ship.

When she spoke, however, her speech was anything but familiar. Nothing sounded normal; even the inflections seemed intentionally misplaced.

"Demood eb yam I ro ecno ta pihs ym esaeler, ssergorp ym gniwols si maeb ruoy, noissim ytiroirp a no mI."

Following this urgent stream of decidedly incomprehensible alien chatter, the viewscreen once again went dark. It was replaced automatically by the view forward—the steadily growing magnificence of the Beta Niobe Nova.

"Human, certainly," Kirk ventured, "unless her race is a shape-changer."

"It would have to be more than that, Captain," Spock observed, "to mimic so precisely without ever having contacted us."

"Possibly even a direct human analog," the captain continued, "though the likeness appears too exact to be true. The only thing that doesn't match up is her language. Never heard anything like that before. Yet somehow it sounds vaguely familiar. I could swear she referred to herself as 'I' at least once."

"It might merely have been the 'aye' sound, Jim," April suggested from behind him. "I didn't recognize the language, either. I haven't heard speech like that, not in all my travels throughout the galaxy. But as you say, it did have something familiar about it. Strange."

"Let's see if the ship's translator can come up with identification, Lieutenant Uhura," ordered Kirk.

"All right, sir."

As she ran the tape of the woman's brief speech through that intricate portion of the *Enterprise*'s computer system, she also allowed the sounds to play over the bridge speakers. Once again everyone listened to that oddly pitched, weirdly modulated, yet faintly familiar babble. Repetition failed to produce enlightenment; no one could make any more sense out of the situation this time than before.

A pause after it trailed off, then, "Negative response, Captain," she finally reported. "Whatever it is, it's no known language in our section of the galaxy."

"Implement decoding procedures," came the command. "Might be a coded variant of some little-known humanoid speech."

The woman on the screen hadn't delivered her message as if it were in code, Kirk thought as Uhura worked. She had delivered her sentence—if that's what it was—rapidly and without apparent effort, as though it were her natural, everyday speech. Furthermore, she had done so in a fashion suggesting that her listeners would understand instantly.

There was surprise and just a hint of embarrassment in Uhura's voice when she spoke again. "I've got the answer, Captain. I should have recognized the pattern right away, but it was a little too close to home. The woman was speaking our own language, only in reverse."

"Reverse," Arex echoed from the navigation station. "No wonder it sounded so familiar, like a tape played backward."

"Correct," Kirk agreed sourly—he should have identified it himself—"only without the distortions one would expect of such a playback.

"All right, Uhura, let's hear that tape again, only backward this time—that should sound forward to us. And put the visual tape on screen again, too."

Uhura nodded. Once more they saw the anxious face of the woman, once more listened to her tense message. Only this time it was easily understandable, even though her words failed to match her mouth movements.

"I'm on a priority mission," the words tumbled out, "your beam is slowing my progress. Release my ship at once or I may be doomed."

"Short and to the point. Open hailing frequency again, Lieutenant, matching ours to her broadcast. Tell her she's endangering her life if she continues on her present course, and explain why. Tape it and then broadcast it in reverse, so she'll understand. Though it's beyond me," he continued puzzledly, "how anyone could head for the heart of a nova and not have an inkling there just might be a bit of danger involved. Something doesn't make sense here." A sudden thought intervened.

"Mr. Spock, we should be close enough to obtain a decent internal sensor scan. How many life forms aboard that vessel?"

"I have just concluded a check of our first readings, Captain. The result is conclusive: There is only one. The woman we saw on the screen."

"No response, sir," Uhura broke in. "She's incapable of replying—or else is just refusing to."

Kirk was about to suggest another approach when a demanding buzz from his armchair intercom caught his attention.

"Engineering to bridge. Engineering to bridge."

"Yes, Scotty, what is it?"

"Captain, I'm gettin' severe stress reports from all over the ship. The *Enterprise* wasn't meant to travel at such a speed."

What speed, Kirk wondered.

Scott rushed on. "If we keep on like this, we'll break up, Captain."

"Just a minute, Scotty." Kirk looked ahead. "Sulu, are we still holding on with that tractor?"

The helmsman checked his readouts. "Holding firm, Captain."

That explained it, then. "Lieutenant Arex, we are apparently being towed. What is our present speed?"

"Warp-eleven, sir," the Edoan replied incredulously, after a frantic check of his instrumentation.

"No wonder Scotty's having trouble. Mr. Spock, how long before the alien vessel impinges on the outermost danger zone, the first lethal radiation?"

Spock made a quick check and performed some rapid calculations. "Three minutes, forty-two seconds plus, Captain. There may be some local variance in field strength, but generally speaking . . ."

Kirk spoke hurriedly to the chair pickup again. "Scotty?"

"I heard, Captain."

"We'd burn up in the nova before our superstructure went. I'm trying to stop that ship from destroying itself."

"Well and noble, Captain," the chief engineer agreed, "but speakin' of destroyin' oneself, keep in mind we can't travel like this much longer."

"Three and half minutes, Scotty, that's all. Give me that. Kirk out."

And he cut off, leaving the chief to oversee some frenzied emergency bracing of the warp-drive engines.

"Speed still increasing, Captain," Arex reported. "Warp-fourteen, warp-fifteen . . ."

Seconds before, they were traveling at warp-eleven, and even that was putting a severe strain on the ship. It also meant that the engines on board that tiny suicidal craft were

even more powerful than first imagined—they were slowly overcoming the drag effect of the *Enterprise*'s tractor.

Kirk had no choice but to release that beam. There was a point beyond which he wasn't willing to go to rescue the confused or misguided pilot of the other ship, and that point had been reached. The *Enterprise* must not be risked.

"Cancel the tractor, Mr. Sulu. Lieutenant Uhura, continue beaming our message at the other ship until they acknowledge or . . ."—he hesitated—". . . until they become incapable of acknowledging. That gives you about three minutes. When she hits those first radiation belts, her instrumentation's going to fry. Maybe she'll at least change course a little."

"Yes, sir," Uhura said doubtfully. "I'll beam it, sir, but . . ."

"Captain . . .?" There was a strained note in Sulu's voice. It brought Kirk's head around quickly. "I can't release the tractor."

"Explain, Mr. Sulu. Fast."

Sulu stared helplessly at his console. "All controls appear inoperative—the ship isn't responding as she should."

"Take it easy, Lieutenant. Go to manual override."

The helmsman's hands flashed over the console, repeated the necessary manipulations again, then a third time. "Still no response, sir. We're locked tight." A touch of panic was creeping into his voice now.

"We've got to break that beam," Kirk said tightly.

"Our speed is now warp-twenty," Spock announced quietly. "Alien vessel will contact first lethal radiation in one minute, fifty seconds."

"Nevermind that now," Kirk shouted. "Mr. Spock, see if you can aid Mr. Sulu." The first officer moved rapidly to the helm. "Lieutenant Uhura, contact Security and have them break out a phaser rifle. I want the tractor-beam components melted into a tin puddle!"

Even as he gave the order he knew there was no way Security could break out the necessary equipment, set up, and perform the required destruction before they passed the

point of no return. They needed those three and a half minutes again, and now they didn't have even half that.

He swiveled in the chair, resigned. "I'm sorry, Commodore, Dr. April. It looks as if we're not going to make this conference."

He saw that further words were unnecessary. The commodore and his wife were probably the most relaxed people on the bridge. It was a serenity derived from having faced death a dozen times before. Anyone who served on a far-ranging starship knew that life was at best a transitory business.

"Captain," April told him, "as Starfleet personnel we were always prepared to give up what small sentience life has granted us. I was ready for the end before I ever set foot on my first ship."

"We're still starship personnel, Captain," Sarah April added softly, holding tight to the now wilting flower.

"We do have one chance left," a grim-faced Kirk explained. "After it enters the first zone of strong radiation, the alien ship should burn up rapidly. With nothing to lock onto, our tractor beam will be freed." He turned toward the science station.

"Mr. Spock, will we have enough time to apply full braking power and execute the necessary course change?"

Spock considered the question in light of the constantly changing information the ship's sensors supplied. "We're up to warp-twenty-four and still increasing speed rapidly, Captain. But I calculate that we will have forty-two point eight five seconds to effect a significant course change following destruction of the alien vessel. That is assuming, of course, that it does not possess radiation screens as advanced as its engines."

Kirk had no time to reflect on that possibility. "Mr. Sulu, I want a course implemented at warp-eight the moment our tractor is released."

"Yes, sir. Bearing, sir?"

"Whatever will get us clear of here the quickest—this is no time to be choosy."

Sulu nodded, then punched the necessary information into the *Enterprise*'s helm. Kirk hit the intercom again.

"Mr. Scott, we're going to try to slow our speed a little. Stand by to apply full braking power in fifty seconds."

"Standing by, Captain," Scott acknowledged. "A good thing, too."

"Fifty-two seconds to contact for the other ship, Captain," Spock declared.

Kirk studied the view on the screen ahead. Detectors still showed the tail end of the tiny alien craft. It seemed incapable of mounting engines equipped to drive it at such incredible velocities. It was almost lost against the now frighteningly near blaze of red, orange-yellow, and white fluorescing gases.

"Eighteen . . . twelve, eleven," the first officer was counting off.

"Stand by to execute course change, Mr. Sulu. No time to spare. Apply maximum braking power."

"Braking," Sulu announced. The fading silhouette of the alien ship had vanished now, subsumed by a licking tongue of orange phosphorescence.

"Now, Sulu," Kirk snapped, unable to restrain giving the verbal command even though he knew the *Enterprise*'s electronic nerves were prekeyed to perform the necessary maneuver.

"Something's wrong, Captain!" Sulu yelled immediately. "We're still being pulled by the alien ship!"

"Impossible, impossible," Kirk murmured. "There shouldn't be anything left for the tractor beam to lock onto. By now that tiny craft and its enigmatic pilot should have been reduced to cinders."

"We're still connected by tractor to something, Captain," announced Arex, "and we're still building speed."

"Contact with destructive energy levels in thirty-five seconds," declared a dispassionate Spock, eyes never straying from his instruments.

"Incredible engineering," Kirk mumbled. "A ship that small capable of warp-thirty-six. If her people can build engines like that, maybe they *have* invented shielding sufficient to permit

a ship to survive the heat and radiation of a nova. But the *Enterprise* can't."

He knew the answer, but decided there was nothing to be lost by a last check. "Mr. Scott, we are receiving full braking power, aren't we?"

"Aye, sir," the answer came back, "but we're as bad off as before. As long as we're locked to that little skiff, or whatever it is, I canna do nothin' with the engines."

"Contact in twenty seconds," Spock informed him solemnly.

"Mr. Sulu . . .?"

"Still no change, sir. We're still locked in. Warp-speed . . . warp-thirty-five."

Kirk was out of the command chair and at the helmsman's side in a second, keying controls himself. It was a last, desperate hope. Even the most experienced officer could overlook . . . overlook what? What could he hope to find that both Sulu and Spock had missed?

Some minuscule calculation, some fail-safe forgotten, ignored.

"It's *got* to work," he muttered to himself as he furiously manipulated useless controls.

"Fourteen seconds," counted Spock inexorably. "Thirteen, twelve . . ."

Kirk returned to his seat, turning slowly as he sat. At least they would not die in darkness. The awesome, overpowering glory of the nova's heart was sucking them in at incredible speed.

"No use. It's finished."

Behind him, Robert April had unobtrusively slipped an arm around his wife's shoulders. Her hands clutched a little tighter around the nearly dead blossom.

"Three . . . two . . . one . . ." Spock concluded.

Something picked the *Enterprise* up and heaved it forward, bounced it off a rubbery surface, and threw it once more. Those on the bridge bobbed about like rubber toys in a bathtub. A dizzying assortment of color swirled about the ship, but no one had the time or inclination to notice—everyone was too busy trying to keep from being tossed against a

bulkhead or neighbor as the ship rode out a tremendous buffeting.

Kirk reflected on the fact that there shouldn't have been any buffeting, let alone anyone still alive to feel it. By now the *Enterprise* should have been nothing but a rapidly diffusing field of ruptured molecules melting into the raging energies of Beta Niobe.

The ship slowly ceased its violent shaking. And yet, Kirk mused as he rose slowly to his feet from where he had been thrown, they were still here, still alive, and, from the looks of the bridge, still functioning. He saw his shocked surprise mirrored in the faces of the other officers as they found themselves intact. Slowly, stations were resumed by dazed personnel.

"What happened?" Uhura finally wondered aloud.

"A great many things, Lieutenant," Spock declared. He was working at his station with an intenseness unusual even for him.

Uhura was unable to request a more specific explanation, because Kirk had called for damage reports. They came in immediately and constituted another surprise. All decks reported no damage, no injuries other than a few minor bumps and scrapes to personnel from being violently thrown about.

Kirk's amazement grew. Everyone still alive, and healthy as well.

Of course, he still had no idea what had happened to them, or where they were cruising at the moment. At any instant the ship might come apart at the seams, as should have happened several minutes before. He shrugged mentally. No point in dwelling on that. Maybe they would at least be spared enough time to figure out what had happened to them.

"Lieutenant Uhura, can you get us any external visuals?"

"I'll try, sir." Some very peculiar static rippled across the main viewscreen, then cleared without warning.

Or had it?

Kirk blinked, but the image that had appeared on the screen was still there, unwavering, unchanged, unbelievable. It was as impressive as it was impossible, in its own bizarre

way. What Kirk and Spock and everyone else saw was a normal-looking universe, normal except for one slight change.

It was a universe of pure white, speckled with stars of varying intensities of black.

"Where are we?" April whispered in amazement.

"I don't . . ." Kirk paused, noticing a new aberration. The starfield on the screen was shrinking away, not moving past. A quick check of instrumentation confirmed his observation. The *Enterprise* was traveling back-end first through this perverse vacuum.

"I believe, Captain," Spock hypothesized aloud as he stared at the negative panorama ahead, "that we have somehow passed into an alternate universe, normal in every respect—but normal in reverse of what we know to be real. We have entered a universe where everything is the opposite of our own."

"Black stars in a white void," Kirk murmured. "It looks frightening, somehow."

"Physics are never frightening, Captain. Merely hard work sometimes."

"Mr. Sulu," Kirk asked firmly, "what's our present situation?"

"Still apparently locked onto the alien ship, Captain."

Kirk turned to his first officer. "Radiation?"

"Nothing, Captain," Spock announced after a moment's check of his gauges. "It seems we're no longer in any danger. I wonder if we ever were."

Kirk thought of one more detail to be checked. "Bridge to Engineering . . . Scotty, how are we holding up?"

"It was hectic for a few minutes, sir. What's going on? Everything's workin' properly—but in reverse. We're havin' to learn how to run the ship all over again, backward. Takes a minute to get used to it. Not the instrumentation adjustments; it's the goin' against years of experience, pushin' *off* when you want *on*, turnin' to maximum when you want to shut somethin' down. I know when I adjust the engine flux backward now that everythin's goin' to be all right, but I canna keep from feelin' in my bones that I'm goin' to blow us to kingdom come."

"Take your time and do the best you can, Scotty," Kirk sympathized. "Speaking of the engines . . .?"

"They shouldn't still be with us, Captain, but they are. Don't ask me how or why. They should have torn free of their pylons a long time ago, considerin' the strain on them."

"Thank you, Scotty. Keep a close watch and let me know if our status changes."

"Aye, sir. Engineering out."

"Now then, Lieutenant Uhura, we're going to contact our closed-mouthed alien-human friend again." The firmness in his tone indicated that this time silence wouldn't be accepted. "We need some answers, and a universe-sized explanation. That pilot is the only one around who can provide them for us."

"Captain Kirk!"

He spun, to see a wide-eyed Dr. April gesturing with something in her hands.

"I'm sure Captain Kirk has other problems to consider at the moment besides the state of your gift, dear," the commodore observed.

"Then he'd better consider this new one, Bob. Look at it. You too, Captain—everyone."

Somehow in the midst of the dire emergency it seemed only proper to find herself staring at a flower. But Dr. April's concern was well-founded.

"Before we entered this negative universe, extra dimension or whatever this is, this bloom was on the verge of dying. Now look at it—it's in full bloom again!"

Indeed, a glance was sufficient to show the brilliant blossom bursting forth with apparently new, waxy petals and glistening young stamen. It had regained the color it had when the Aprils had boarded the *Enterprise* . . . and more.

"It doesn't make sense," Kirk finally commented, "which only makes sense here, I suppose. If everything else is backward . . ."

"It's more than a regeneration, Captain," she went on. "It's almost as if it were growing younger again. I can feel the regeneration as I'm holding it."

"Feel it . . . you can see it," Sulu declared.

Even as they watched the blossom began to shrink again, the petals pulling in on themselves, as the flower commenced its return toward the small, hard bud from which it had originally sprung.

"Captain," Spock put in, "I suspect that Dr. April's flower is not the only thing on board that is growing younger."

"What do you mean, Mr. Spock?"

"To start, Captain, you might note that the ship's chronometers are running backward."

Kirk stared down at his own wrist instrument. He watched the second hand methodically tick off time in a counterclockwise direction. As he watched, he could see the minute hand slowly edging backward as well.

The full alienness of the situation in which they found themselves was driven home more powerfully by this simple alteration of an everyday event—the measuring of time—than by the view of black stars spotted across white space.

"Time as well as physics is apparently reversed here, Captain," the first officer concluded.

"One crisis at a time, Spock."

Uhura called to him. "The alien ship is finally responding to our call, Captain. I have visual contact established, ready to put on the screen."

"Please do so, Lieutenant."

Once more the portrait of the alien pilot appeared before them. Only this time, when she spoke, the words sounding on the speakers matched her mouth movements, and Kirk found he could understand her perfectly.

"Your actions almost cost me my life, and your own as well." She was obviously still confused as to why the *Enterprise* had interfered. "Why didn't you release my ship as I asked?"

"This poses an interesting physical and semantic question, Captain," mused Spock. "Are we understanding her speech because she is speaking backward but our thought processes are reversed?"

"We can debate it later, Mr. Spock. At the moment, the only thing I'm interested in reversing for sure is our presence here."

But the alien pilot *had* posed a question.

"I'm Captain James T. Kirk, commanding the U.S.S. *Enterprise*. We tried to prevent you from entering the Beta Niobe Nova because it has been our experience in the past that vessels which enter novas are never heard from again. We thought that you might have been injured, or your ship's navigation helm crippled. We had no reason to believe," he continued drily, "that your vessel was equipped to withstand such forces. For that matter, we didn't expect our own ship could, either. We attempted to disengage our tractor beam at the last minute, but were unable to do so."

"I see. Your gesture was gallant and well-meaning, but wholly unnecessary. I had to return to my own universe, Captain Kirk. In order to do so, it was necessary for my ship to pass through the distortion fields and stress energies of what you call the Beta Niobe Nova, in order to emerge into my universe from the new star, Amphion."

"New star? Mr. Spock, check our readings aft."

Spock looked up a moment later and nodded in confirmation of the pilot's claim. "It seems to be so, Captain. Instead of a nova, retracing our course leads us back into what appears to be a very new, very black star."

"Who are you," Kirk asked the flat, solemn face on the screen, "and how did you come to be in our universe in the first place?"

"I am a solitary explorer—Karla Five, I am called. I was caught unawares when Amphion, previously a dead star, abruptly went nova and came to life. I was pulled in by the explosively expanding gravitational field. Instead of burning up, I passed into a universe where everything operates in reverse of my own."

"Our universe," Kirk said.

"I wandered helplessly for several months, but never losing track of the place where I had emerged into your universe," she continued. "Endless calculations led me to a single conclusion: The only chance I had of returning home was to

pass back at maximum acceleration through the exploding star, your nova. And then at that last moment, you happened on a ship you thought was in distress, and were drawn in with me. I am sorry."

"You mentioned your calculations," Spock reminded her. "What is your explanation for this transuniverse effect?"

"Tentative, certainly," Karla Five explained. "It would appear that the forces at the heart of a nova generate sufficient spatial stress to create a bridge between our two universes. A vessel moving toward this shifting bridge at a sufficient speed will pass from universe to universe rapidly enough to avoid the dangerous energies which exist in such centers."

Behind Kirk, Commodore April listened to Karla Five's theory with astonishment and admiration. "In her universe, then, a nova is a dead star which comes to life, whereas in ours it's one which is going through its death throes in a violent manner. When these two differently defined events take place at a particular point in space, it is possible to travel between the two. This discovery could revolutionize cosmology."

"*If* we can get back to tell it to anyone," Kirk reminded him. "And the way to do that seems pretty obvious. We have to go back the way we came, through the double nova."

Karla Five looked troubled. "Would that I could be sure such a thing was possible, Captain Kirk. Amphion was not a full-sized burning sun when I was drawn into it. That has changed. I would not think it possible to dive into the heart of a live sun and survive."

"We'd think the same thing of a full-sized nova, which is what Beta Niobe is," Kirk countered.

"True, Captain. Even so, the question of our return is apparently not a simple matter of retracing our steps. We must examine the alternatives more intensely."

"What would you suggest, Mr. Spock?"

"Some additional time to consider the physics of the matter, and if possible to study the information produced by Karla Five's computer."

"Naturally I'll give all the aid I can, as will my people," the alien pilot told them. "I am now proceeding to my home world

of Arret, Captain Kirk. I suggest you set a course to follow my ship."

"That shouldn't be difficult," Kirk replied, "seeing as how we're still attached to you by our tractor beam." She looked grim, shook her head.

Of course, that undoubtedly constituted a friendly gesture here, Kirk reminded himself. Unless she was concerned about something else. Unless his own optic nerves were also working in reverse, feeding him backward information. Or . . .

He shook his head. There were ramifications to their present situation that could drive a man mad.

"Mr. Sulu, plot a following course. And keep trying to disengage that tractor beam. Meanwhile call off the security detail—no point in destroying the tractor mechanism now."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Mr. Spock, get with your people in Life Sciences and see if they can verify that everyone on board is growing younger. Also the rate at which such reverse aging is taking place—if in fact that's what's happening to us."

It didn't take long for the efficient instruments and technicians of the great cruiser to verify that that was precisely what was happening.

Kirk considered the news calmly, finally glancing up from his command position. "Well, there you have it, everyone. I'm sure none of us minds growing younger instead of older for a change."

Silence.

"It pleases me anyway, Jim," April finally said. "If we could remain in this universe long enough, I'd no longer be at the mandatory retirement age."

"Let's not lose sight of our present position, Commodore. We must return home. I'm open to suggestions. Spock?"

"There seems only one reasonably sure way, Captain," he explained quietly. "We must reproduce, as exactly as possible, the conditions which carried Karla Five's ship from her universe into ours. Two novas must occupy the same space in both universes in order to create the proper gateway. The difficulty here has already been pinpointed by Karla Five.

"We must locate a star in the process of being born, which must also coincide with a nova in our own galaxy. As she has pointed out, Amphion is now a raging furnace, a growing star. We cannot chance returning via the same route."

April was shaking his head. "The chances of our doing that even if we had time to scan this whole negative galaxy . . . no, Mr. Spock, the odds are too high to compute."

"I must disagree with your evaluation of our chances, Commodore. I have already computed the odds. They are on the order of fifty-two million to one."

Kirk grinned tightly . . . or did he frown, and have it reversed here? No way of knowing. "At least we have a chance."

Heated discussion followed, which included most of the engineering officers and astrophysics technicians. Various suggestions were made; one was to detach the *Enterprise*'s saucer and main living quarters and use the warp-drive engines to overload, thus generating a new star in this universe.

Scott vetoed the idea, pointing out vociferously that they were not in the business of making stars, that the physics were doubtful, that there was no way they could be certain of aligning their artificially generated sun with an existing nova in the positive universe—and besides, without the warp-drive engines they might not get up enough speed to make the dangerous passage in time to prevent total destruction.

The suggestion, along with the others, was tabled. Most were more fantastic than reasonable, requiring gigantic amounts of energy beyond the *Enterprise*'s ability to produce.

Nevertheless, discussions continued throughout the ship, even as they entered orbit around Karla Five's home world of Arret.

"Message coming in, Captain," Uhura announced. "Karla Five is asking if you're prepared to beam down to her world."

"Indicate that we'll be down shortly. Commodore April, Mr. Spock, and I will comprise the landing party."

Kirk rose from his chair and headed for the turbolift, April following. They arrived in the Transporter Room to find Scott

waiting for them, prepared to handle the transporter chores himself. But the chief engineer could not disguise a worried frown.

"Something the matter, Scotty? Karla Five *has* given us coordinates to beam down?"

"Aye, sir, she has that."

The three officers moved to the transporter alcove. "Well," Kirk prompted, "why the hesitation, Scotty? I know when something's on your mind."

"It's just, Captain, that . . . well, she identifies the location as her son's laboratory."

Kirk's forehead furrowed. He considered the obvious youth of Karla Five, his ship's desperate situation, and understood the cause of Scott's concern.

"I see what you mean, Scotty. We don't have time for kid games right now. But these people live in a peculiar universe. Their sense of humor might be somewhat backward, too. Anyhow, those are the coordinates she gave. I suspect we're going to need her help to get out of this. Let's not give unnecessary offense. Beam us down, Mr. Scott."

"Aye, sir," Scott acknowledged, looking unhappy. He moved the appropriate levers and dials.

A high whine sounded in the chamber, shrill and familiar. But the corresponding sensation of molecular dissolution was absent. Kirk glanced down, saw himself still standing, solid as ever, on the transporter disk. He looked questioningly at the transporter console, but Scott seemed equally puzzled.

"I dinna understand it, Captain. I'm running through the usual sequence. Everything checks out operational, but—"

Spock interrupted. "The key word is 'usual,' Mr. Scott. Reverse the procedure. Beam us *up* from the provided coordinates."

"But you're already . . . ach, of course! I should know by now."

Reversing the standard transporter sequence produced three properly glittering pillars of light within the alcove.

III

Kirk, Spock, and Commodore April materialized on the steps of a two-story modern structure. A short glance around indicated that they were located on the outskirts of a fair-sized metropolis.

The buildings around them, and in the distant urban area, were decidedly different. Not unattractively so, Kirk noted approvingly. They were clearly designed for normal-sized, normally proportioned humanoids. Only the aesthetic approach was different.

Leaning back, Kirk squinted at the sky. It was blue, but with an alien suggestion of bright green. Somewhere above it, he knew, it faded into a white canopy against which an orphaned *Enterprise* orbited forlornly.

"Good evening, gentlemen."

Karla Five was standing in the entrance to the building, squinting at them and smiling. "I'm sorry you had to arrive on Arret in the middle of the night."

Kirk began to wonder if his mind was running in circles now as well as in reverse. "Middle of the night?" he echoed. "The sun is shining in our faces."

"I beg your pardon, Captain?" Karla Five looked amused. "What a funny thing to say. The moon is quite visible. See?" And she indicated the dark purple orb which dominated the sky.

Kirk stared. "You'll have to excuse me, I'm still not used to reversing everything. It takes some getting used to."

"No need to explain, Captain Kirk," she replied. "I know exactly what you're going through. At least you have the company of others to help you. When I was thrown unexpectedly into your universe I nearly went mad. Imagine seeing brightly colored stars against *black* space. Horrible, unnatural sight!

"Anyway," she assured them, "the sun will come up soon and it will be dark again. Please come into my son's

laboratory. I've awakened him, and he's already hard at work on your problem."

The interior of the house was as pleasant as the exterior, filled with many full-grown plants undoubtedly growing younger. Karla Five led them to a large, spacious chamber. The walls were lined with star-maps—all black on white, of course.

They proceeded to a small, rectangular construct set in the far corner of the vast, domed room. Closer inspection revealed its identity. There was nothing mysterious about it, and since it was exactly what it appeared to be, Kirk thought it utterly out of place in the extensively equipped lab.

It was a playpen, and it was occupied now by a small child. The infant was surrounded by toys, a plastic bottle of liquid, and numerous other less readily identifiable items.

At the moment the child was on its unsteady, stubby legs, playing with a rattling attachment secured to the side of the crib.

Kirk noticed a man in his fifties working nearby. He nodded on noticing Kirk's gaze, then adjusted his lab coat and went back to realigning the chart slides he was projecting on a far section of wall.

"With all respect," April commented, also noticing the busy adult, "how can a woman as young as you have a son old enough to be accomplished in the sciences?"

Karla Five's surprise seemed genuine. "I'm astonished that a young man like yourself would ask such a question, Commodore April. Allow me to introduce my son, Karl Four."

Kirk was beginning to wonder if he was expected to shake hands with the infant, when the older man approached them.

"I'm honored to meet you, gentlemen," he began. "I've read my mother's tapes of her encounter with you in the other universe, and how you come to be here. I hope I can help."

Spock was explaining even as Kirk tried once more to readjust his thinking.

"Eminently logical, you see. Since the flow of time is reversed here, then it is natural for one to be born at an advanced age and to die in infancy. Your descendants," he

said to Karl Four, "are born before you, and your ancestors after. I should like to see some local obstetrical—"

"Please, Mr. Spock," Kirk interrupted, a mite desperately, "let's stick to physics."

"If this is your son," April inquired, "then who is the chap in the playpen?"

"Karl Six, of course," she explained easily. "My father. He's led a long and healthy life, made many contributions to our people in the sciences." She shook her head—happily? Sadly, Kirk corrected himself.

"I'm afraid most of his knowledge is gone now. He has entered senile infancy."

"You mean he no longer has it?" wondered Kirk.

Karla Five made a gesture. "I mean our society no longer has it. As our race evolves, all knowledge is lost . . . the natural order of things."

"More and more fascinating," declared a thoroughly enchanted Spock. "A race begins with all the knowledge it will ever have, and as it evolves, the knowledge is progressively lost. Progressive regression."

"We could remain eternally awed at the differences between our universes and civilizations," Kirk snapped briskly, "but we have to find a method of returning to our own universe."

"Exactly what I've been devoting all my time to since Karla Five beamed me the details of your difficulty," Karl Four told them. He gestured. "If you'll direct your attention to the far wall . . ."

As they turned, he moved to a small panel and adjusted the switches on it. The wall across the chamber seemed to vanish. In its place was a three-dimensional cube looking for all the world like a gigantic block of glassy chocolate-chip ice cream.

"This is an in-depth map of our galaxy—at least, the portion of it we have explored," Karl Four explained. "Our home system, and Arret, is here."

As he spoke, one of the black flecks near the cube's center brightened—or was it darkened?

"And you entered our universe through the new star, the Amphion Nova . . . here." A minuscule distance away from the first, a second black fleck pulsed noticeably.

Kirk studied the exquisite detail of the map carefully. "Somehow we have to coordinate this with our own charts, match the location of known novas in our universe to potential birthing stars here. Mr. Spock?"

"I foresee no difficulty, Captain. All physical laws appear to operate uniformly here, only in opposition to those we know. Therefore, distances and speeds in this universe should conform to our own. Karl Four, if I could have a look at the workings of your chart projector, and an explanation . . ."

"At your service, sir," the Arretian scientist responded.

Several hours of study and numerous exchanges of information with the Engineering Department brought results in the form of several specially modified chart-spools beamed down from the orbiting starship.

They should have functioned, according to Spock's design, in the Arretian navigational computer, but they did not. They failed even to activate it.

It was April who suggested the solution. "How soon we forget. Try running your computer in reverse, Karl Four. It should accept our information then."

And so it was. Everything went smoothly after that.

"Incredible, the degree of parallel," Karl Four murmured continually. "I wonder which universe will meet its end first. Yours, which is aging, or ours, which becomes progressively more youthful. I wonder if the nova-nova bridge is the only physical interrelation between our universes. I wonder," he mused, "what the theological relationships might be?"

"Maybe someday we'll have time to find out," ventured Kirk. "Right now, it's the nova-nova bridge I'm interested in."

"Assuming Beta Niobe and the Amphion sun here do match up on the two charts, Mr. Spock," wondered April aloud, "*can* we locate similar potential occurrences in both universes?"

Spock replied thoughtfully. "I believe so, Commodore, provided the Arretian navigational equipment will continue to process *Enterprise* information as efficiently as it has thus far."

Karl Four adjusted the chart projector once again. Kirk started in spite of himself when the huge map shifted suddenly to a black cube with colored stars hung within. Nor could he fail to notice the way Karl Four jumped at the appearance of the, to him, perverse sight—one which contradicted all his own laws of nature.

"A direct match-up," said Spock, indicating the second still-pulsing pinpoint. "Beta Niobe . . . Amphion on the negative-universe chart. Plotting from there . . . have you some kind of probe, sir?"

Karl Four hunted in a cabinet until he produced a long, thin metal rod. He handed it to Spock, who inserted it into the black cube, moving it slowly forward through space and stars with equal facility, until the tip stopped near a small star.

"This should be Vulcan."

The Arretian pressed a switch, and the system Spock had located glowed brightly. Again the pointer moved, slightly.

"And here, Earth."

"Amazing," Karla Five said. She nodded to her son, who switched back to the Arretian chart. "It corresponds exactly to Arret." Back to the color-on-black universe of the Federation. Kirk found himself growing a little dizzy as they switched universes by the minute.

"I would like to visit my Vulcan analog," Spock declared, studying the glowing points within the cube projection. "Perhaps someday it will be possible."

"If we don't get out of here, Mr. Spock, you'll have a chance to do more visiting than you want."

"That anxious I am not, Captain." The first officer turned his attention back to the chart, gesturing with the long pointer for all the world like a schoolmaster lecturing a class of youngsters.

"It is now possible to determine with reasonable accuracy the position of simultaneous novas in the two universes, with more ease than I thought would be the case. If . . ." and he looked back at Karl Four, "you can coordinate both maps at the same time."

The Arretian thought hard a moment, then shook his head slowly. "Yes, I think the projector can handle two spools at

once. I won't vouch for what it will look like, though."

He worked at the controls. The result was a chart that was neither black nor white, but a faded gray. The density of the chart was tremendously increased, filled as it was with nearly twice the number of stars and systems.

"A touch here," Karl Four murmured, "and we should see something interesting."

Twenty-odd points on the chart turned red. Spock studied them, then walked over and had a brief, tense conversation with the astronomer.

"The red glows indicate where two stars occupy the same space in both universes," he explained to the onlookers. "The difficulty is that while several are novas in our universe, none is sufficiently youthful to be birthing stars here.

"The star material here which will birth soonest, Karl Four tells me, is this point," and he indicated one of the pulsing lights. "It will spring to life in roughly three hundred fifty of our years . . . give or take a decade or two."

"And we haven't got three hundred fifty years—give or take anything," Kirk declared. "Though it's not a question of age." His mouth twisted slightly. "We'd all have returned to infancy and been long gone by then."

Spock inhaled deeply. "Unfortunately correct, Captain."

"There's the chance of keying one of these potential new novas into life here, gentlemen. Locate the best possible combination of swirling gases and concurrent pressure, and ignite the first thermonuclear reaction. An overloaded ship engine could conceivably do it," Karl Four said.

"We thought of that," Kirk told him, "but we can't use our warp-drive engines—that would leave us relatively helpless, our speed curtailed severely."

"How about one of our vessels?" the Arretian suggested.

"If you think it might work. I don't see us trying anything else."

"There is one other problem." They turned to look at Karla Five. "In order to avoid destruction, I had to pass through the nova at maximum velocity. I understand that your vessel, Captain Kirk, is not capable of such speeds."

"A good point, Captain," Spock agreed. "To which I see no immediate solution."

"Of course, you're welcome to use my ship, Captain Kirk. It is the most advanced of its type . . . we have no others capable of reaching such speeds, either."

"Then I'm afraid that won't do us much good, Karla," Kirk replied sadly. "Thanks for the offer . . . but I have a crew of four hundred thirty, and your ship is suitable for only a few people, at most."

"Captain," Spock said, suddenly brightening, "there is a chance Karla Five's vessel *could* solve all these problems. We require another, powerful vessel to go to overload, to initiate the new star. We can use hers both as an unmanned projectile, to accomplish this, and as a tug to aid us in achieving the necessary speed. We need merely keep our tractor beam attached. We gained the velocity required to pass into this universe in this fashion. I do not see why we cannot use the same method to pass out from it."

"Spock, you may be right. You'd better be, because I don't see that we've got another choice," he finished grimly.

"Of course, any miscalculation . . ." He paused meaningfully. "If the reaction isn't sufficient to set off the new star in this universe, we may run through a murderous field of superhot plasma. Or if speed alone is enough to carry us through, the proper distortion may not be created. In that event, we could emerge right in the heart of an unstressed nova."

"In which case," April observed succinctly, "we won't have time to consider our mistake . . . having already ceased to exist."

Preparations proceeded smoothly, thanks to the aid of the sympathetic Arretians. Some of Arret's top physicists reworked the mathematics, to insure that everything would perform as required. For example, it was felt that merely overloading the extremely advanced engines which powered Karla Five's exploratory skiff would be insufficient to spark the necessary thermonuclear reaction in the center of the star-to-be. So the Arretian military loaded the smaller craft with compact but immensely powerful fusion weaponry, to provide a proper catalyst.

Linkages were established which would permit the *Enterprise*'s helm to control Karla Five's vessel as precisely as a living pilot could. Eventually, the two ships left Arretian orbit together, traveling at rapidly increasing speed and with the best wishes of Arret's scientific community. The prognosis was only slightly in favor of success, but both sides concealed their true feelings and concerns under a mask of empirical assurance.

"Captain's log, Stardate 5536.6," Kirk was reciting, days later. "Time continues to flow backward for us. We have set our course for a dead star aborning in this universe which corresponds to the nova Minerva in ours.

"There appears to be a new, correlating factor between the flow of time and our increasing speed, but as yet this has presented no difficulty. We are on course, and all instrumentation is operating at maximum efficiency, including the devices linking the *Enterprise* to the Arretian scout ship."

He concluded the entry and turned a gaze as yet only mildly concerned toward the science station. "Mr. Spock, any indication as to what the possible effects of the accelerated time-flow might be?"

"Theoretical only, thus far, Captain," his first officer replied. Then he added the obvious, "Anyhow, we must proceed with the programmed course and velocity regardless of all side effects. It is our only chance."

Kirk nodded, looking over his shoulder, and smiled at the pacing figure of Commodore April. He had been walking his destinationless path ever since they had left Arret.

"You may as well relax, sir. As Mr. Spock says, our course of action is committed, unalterable. And that patch of brown in your hair is very becoming."

April stopped, grinned a lopsided grin at Kirk. "Thank you, Captain. You're looking rather on the youngish side yourself, lately. Don't let my aimless meandering worry you . . . I *am* relaxing." The grin vanished, and he looked disappointedly at the deck.

"I have mixed feelings about the remainder of our journey, no matter what its outcome. Oh, I'll be glad to get home, all

right, but not necessarily to Babel. That only means the official end of my career. Of my usefulness . . ."

Kirk was spared the necessity of a reply as Spock broke in with an announcement. "I have visual contact with the region of the potential new star, Captain."

Kirk mentally thanked his first officer for the interruption—the conversation was beginning to make him uncomfortable. His tone turned businesslike.

"Let's see what we're heading into, Mr. Spock."

The *Enterprise*'s forward sensors leaped ahead, finally slowing to focus on still another rectangle of this fantastic, cream-colored universe with its black suns and feathery gray nebulae.

"I don't see anything, Mr. Spock."

"A moment, Captain. We are headed directly for it, but it is denser white matter in white space. I will superimpose an outline."

Adjustments at the science console produced a rough black circle in the center of the screen.

"If I didn't know better, Mr. Spock, I'd suspect it was another white hole."

"No, Captain, preliminary sensor readings indicate it's nothing like the one we encountered near the Milky Way's Shapely Center.

"There is considerable stress, shifting gravitational potential, and other unusual phenomena present, but nowhere near the extreme distortions of the spatial matrix we encountered in the white hole."

"Just as well," Kirk murmured. "I've no desire to repeat that trip again." Uhura called over to him, cutting off his thoughts in midremembrance.

"Message coming in from Arret, Captain. Karla Five making contact."

"Put her through, Lieutenant."

Transmission all the way from Arret was no longer crystal-clear, but the resolution was sufficient to show the aged yet youthful scout standing before the star-chart projector in her son's laboratory.

"I want to wish you luck, Captain Kirk," she said, her voice filtered and distorted with distance. "I was present at the official farewell, but I applied for and received permission to make this final broadcast. As I was, in a way, personally responsible for bringing you here, the government felt I was entitled to wish you on your way personally. The pity of it is that after all we've done, no matter what the astrophysicists tell me, I'll never know if you fail or succeed."

"Just keep in mind that you've done all you could for us, Karla," replied Kirk truthfully. "And perhaps you will know someday. Someday when a way is found of crossing the barriers between our universes in safety and comfort. When that day comes, we'll thank you personally for your help . . . in *our* universe, next time. The important thing is that you've shown such a journey is possible. We thank you also for the sacrifice of your vessel. You see, I know that your government couldn't force you to turn it over to us, and that you volunteered it freely."

"A small sacrifice, Captain," the fading, emotional voice declared. "The information I was able to bring back is worth more to my people than any number of such vessels. Indeed, the information your computer library supplied made up the loss of one scout many times over.

"I only hope that it proves to be a worthwhile sacrifice. Success to you, Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, Commodore April, and all . . ."

The screen blanked. "Transmission ended from Arret, sir," Uhura reported dutifully.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Mr. Spock?" The view of space forward resumed. "Mr. Sulu, how's the tractor link holding up?"

Sulu checked his read-outs. To ensure that the invisible bond joining the *Enterprise* and the smaller Arretian ship didn't break at a crucial juncture, every tractor beam on board that could be brought to bear was locked on the superfast scout.

"Still holding firm, Captain. The original tractor link as well as all subsequent holds."

"Very good, Lieutenant. Let me know immediately if the bonds show any sign of weakening."

Sulu nodded as Arex reported from navigation. "Speed increasing steadily, Captain. We're holding on course."

That left one last section to check. "Bridge to Engineering . . . Scotty, are you there?"

"Standin' by, Captain."

"What's our situation?"

"Stable so far, sir," the chief engineer reported. "Of course, I've some idea what to expect this time around, and we've prepared for it—I hope. That new bracin' installed by the Arretians seems to be doin' what they claimed it would. If it holds up under this passage it's goin' to cause some heavy thinking on the part of the engineers responsible for designin' warp-drive supports. Not to mention what a sensation those diagrams of that scout ship's engines are goin' to be."

"Don't get too excited about that, Scotty," Kirk reminded him. "Remember, the element that powers those engines is found only in the Arretian's universe. We'll have to work out the difficulties of interuniversal transport and travel before we can think of a cruiser traveling at warp-thirty or so."

"I know, Captain," Scott replied, trying not to sound as disappointed as he was. "Ah, but wouldn't it be a darlin' surprise for our friends the Klingons!"

It was hours later, when they had more than doubled their speed, that Kirk noticed the at once marvelous, ominous change creeping through the *Enterprise*.

He had been so involved in last-minute course calculations, in monitoring the status of the Arretian scout, that he had failed to see the startling alterations taking place all around him. In fairness, though, so had everyone else. The gradualness of the first changes—and their uniformity—were responsible for the oversight.

Metamorphosis was proceeding so rapidly now, however, that it struck Kirk like a blow to the belly. The subtle sensation that something was drastically different was concretized when McCoy and Sarah April reappeared on the bridge. The shift was most apparent in their faces.

The deep lines caused by too many patients lost through the unavailability of the necessary drugs, too many needless deaths incurred on hostile worlds, were missing from McCoy's visage. He was noticeably younger.

As was Dr. Sarah April, paragon of Starfleet medical technology, who was now a very, unvenerable fortyish beauty devoid of white hair, lines around the eyes, and all other indications of advanced age.

Abruptly Kirk saw the bridge staff through clear eyes and a clear mind. Sulu and Uhura, he now noticed, had regained the appearance of teenagers. Spock showed the least amount of change, which was only natural as Vulcans aged more slowly than humans. It was hardest to tell when he looked at Arex, since adolescent Edoans often look exactly like their wizened elders.

"Mr. Spock, I think we have passed the point of needing theoretical opinions on the effects of the increased time-flow."

"I had noticed it before now, Captain," the first officer said somberly, "but as we have no alternative course of action, I saw no point in needlessly distressing anyone."

Kirk wasn't sure he agreed with Spock's reasoning, but he had no time to argue with it. He wasn't sure how much time he had left, period.

"I suppose the first crucial minute will be when our youngest crew member returns to . . . to the moment of birth," he ventured.

Spock concurred. "That will take place, taking into account a rapid increase in our regression corresponding to our increasing speed, in approximately eighteen minutes, thirty-five seconds, Captain. However, that will not be the most crucial time."

"Explain, Mr. Spock."

"Before that point is reached, we will all have returned to infantilism. And," he concluded, "this means we are losing our knowledge concomitant with our years, and both at an alarming rate. It is possible that we will be too young, mentally, to operate the *Enterprise* at the crucial stage in our interuniversal passage . . ."

IV

Kirk pondered the problem for long minutes, then broke off when he found himself staring with a little too much fascination at the sixteen-year-old boy sitting before the now massive-looking helm console.

"How's our present course, Mr. Sulu?"

The youth started to reply, hesitated, and stared blankly at the now bewildering array of instrumentation spread before him. "I . . . I'm not sure," he finally confessed in a shockingly altered tenor. "What am I doing here, anyway? What are all these dials and gauges and lights?" He turned and stared with rising confusion at Kirk.

"And you . . . you're . . .? Who are you, mister?"

"He's too young, Captain," Spock interrupted. "Far younger than he was when he entered Starfleet. Not only has he regressed beyond the point of knowing how to operate *Enterprise* instrumentation, his youthful mind is beginning to doubt its far larger store of memories. Look at Lieutenant Uhura."

Kirk turned and saw a puzzled young girl running her hands uncertainly over winking telltales.

"They are turning into children, Captain," Spock concluded.

"But they just can't lose all their acquired knowledge, Mr. Spock. Our physical makeup isn't the same as the Arretians."

"I suspect all the knowledge is still there, Captain," his first officer explained, "locked away deep within their minds. But the mechanism for retrieving such information is degenerating as they grow younger."

"We'll cope, somehow," countered Kirk tightly. "Mr. Arex, take over helm functions for Mr. Sulu. I want a full status report from all sections, Lieutenant Uhura. Lieutenant Uhura?"

"I beg your pardon, mister?" she replied dazedly.

"Never mind. Spock, you can fill in for her temporarily. Their replacements would only be as young and ineffective as they.

You and Mr. Arex are the only longer-lived crew members on board."

"True, Captain," admitted Spock. "We will manage as long as we are able. But who will fill in for you?"

Kirk gave him a peculiar look. "What do you mean, 'fill in for me'?"

Spock explained patiently something Kirk knew but refused to believe. "You are a deal older than Lieutenant Sulu or Uhura, but at what age did you become a starship captain? How old were you when you entered Starfleet Academy? When did you take advanced navigation, or command mechanics?"

Kirk chewed that over, then finally nodded reluctant agreement. "We'll lose control rapidly, all right. By the time we reach the vicinity of the potential star, I'm not going to know what we have to do, let alone how to do it."

"As a Vulcan, I age the slowest, true," Spock commented. There was no hint of pride or racial arrogance in that statement. It was merely fact. Merely Spock. "I will be capable of retaining my effectiveness longer than anyone else.

"But I fear even I will become too young to know what to do at the crucial moment. It will be close . . . very close." He glanced at his controls, wondering idly at what moment they would become only glassed-in numbers for him. He wished he could divorce himself from his body to study the no doubt intriguing phenomenon at leisure.

"Ten minutes, fourteen seconds," he announced finally. "We may just make it, Captain, according to the final computer projection. At the appropriate moment it will be vital to activate the weaponry on board the Arretian scout. That must be handled by someone other than myself."

Kirk blinked at the strange words. He saw things plainly, but his thoughts were masked by thicker and thicker layers of uncertainty. Nothing related to anything else. He found he could describe but not explain, see without understanding, perceive but not evaluate.

Children surrounded him, at the helm, at Communications. And at the navigation console, even Arex was beginning to look decidedly cuddly.

"Captain," a demanding voice said, "do you think you will be able to handle the Arretian engine overload functions?"

"Overload . . . engine overload? How do we do that, Mr. Spock?"

The first officer inhaled deeply. In his still-exacting mind, their chances dropped a few percentage points. "I fear I must assume control, Captain. You are no longer able to command the *Enterprise*."

Kirk retained enough maturity to readily agree. "Whatever you say, Spock. What shall I do?"

A new voice spoke up. Its master had just now appeared on the bridge, had only taken stock of the recent developments.

He was tall, straight, supremely confident. The voice was new and at the same time familiar. A bit softer now, perhaps, its timbre sharp and precise. Kirk thought he recognized it, thought he recognized the stranger as well.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Spock," the voice said commandingly. "As long as I'm aboard, I'm still senior officer here. My subsequent appointment as ambassador-at-large does not supersede my Starfleet ranking, it only complements it. I hate to pull rank, but I'd guess that in another five minutes even you will become incapable of command, much less of performing intricate operations." He checked his madly revolving watch, noting the speed with which the hands were spinning in reverse.

"That's not soon enough to execute the few but vital maneuvers essential to our hope of return."

Spock did not argue; there was no reason to. The commodore's logic was unassailable. "You are correct, of course, Commodore April. I had forgotten all but regular crew under the stress of the moment. I would be grateful if you would assume command."

"I hereby do so officially, Mr. Spock." He sounded slightly bemused now. "But why the 'commodore'? It's Captain . . . Captain April."

"Who?" muttered Spock.

"Bob . . .?"

The young commodore-captain turned.

"We seem to be the only adults left on the bridge," Sarah April observed. "They're all children now, or teenaged."

Her husband nodded. "Make sure they don't hurt themselves, Sarah." He turned his attention to the instruments at the helm. "If we're going to go home, instead of to blazes, we have to ignite this star at just the right moment. Mr. Spock, I realize your reasoning powers are now impaired, but how are you at still following orders?"

Spock strained visibly. "Information . . . is vanishing rapidly, sir. For the moment . . . yes, I can function. The sensation is somewhat akin to submitting to anesthesia."

"Right. Assume the navigator's position." The adolescent Vulcan proceeded to do so, gently moving a squawking, feathered protester out of the chair.

"Report, Mr. Spock," April said from the helm.

"The potential star is directly ahead, Captain." The first officer's manner and inflection were steady as ever. Only a close acquaintance would have noted the lighter, slightly less serious tone in his speech. "Bearing, mark," and he strenuously recited the readings, unsure of their meaning. But observation did not require as much knowledge as interpretation, and another pair of eyes was what April needed now.

"Activate the weaponry on board the Arretian ship."

That almost . . . almost defeated Spock. Knowledge was draining from him like water from a cracked pitcher. It took a long minute of painful thought before he was able to key the relatively simple command required to arm the awesome energies packed into the tiny scout.

"Activated, Captain," he finally acknowledged.

"Nine seconds to ignition," April recited, staring at the helm readouts. "Seven, six . . ." His gaze rose to the main screen, as did Sarah April's and Spock's.

A black flower blossomed before them, its stretching petals tinged with violet and royal blue. The unnatural colors were startling against the pure white background of space.

April spared a split second for a survey of the bridge. No longer did it resemble the hub of one of the Federation's most

storied, most efficient ships. Instead it had taken on the appearance of an undisciplined interspecies nursery.

Children and in some cases infants now babbled and struggled within the confines of baggy clothing grown monstrously large for their tiny forms: Naturally, the inorganic materials had not shrunk along with the crew members. If anything, April noted with alarm, the rate of reverse was accelerating. Surely the first officer now fumbling confusedly at the navigation console was no older than seven. He was past following even simple commands.

There was, however, still one other person on the bridge who could perform the remaining crucial maneuvers. One whose ability matched if not exceeded his own. He looked over his shoulder at the radiantly beautiful woman watching him.

"Sarah, do you remember any of your basic navigation?"

"Like it was yesterday, Bob." She moved to the navigation console while the commodore-captain assumed the command chair.

"Keep us on course, whatever else happens, whatever might happen to me," April told her. She studied the instrumentation briefly, moved her hands over the dials and switches. It seemed like only yesterday she was tested on similar boards to pass her basic command functions classes at the Academy.

A small adjustment was called for here. The computer identified the deviation and brought it to the attention of its human masters. It could do no more. It needed an organic mind to order the necessary shift in course. Sarah April moved almost automatically to provide that command.

Satisfied, the navigation computer realigned the *Enterprise*. Once more it was on the course prescribed for its eventual salvation . . . or destruction.

Tail first, the great cruiser plunged into the center of a rapidly heating mass of pressurized gases and particles. The tremendous release of energy produced by the volatized Arretian ship had kindled strange reactions among the mass of already unstable material.

As a tremendous shaking suddenly gripped the *Enterprise*, fusion began.

Sarah April felt like a pebble in a tin can as she clung tightly to the navigation console. But Commodore-Captain April locked himself into the command chair and exulted in the glory conveyed by the main viewscreen.

For what seemed like hours, but was mere seconds, they rode the shock wave of ruptured space.

Abruptly, without warning, the buffeting ceased. There was only the soft hum of monitors, the quiet beeps and mutters of unstressed instruments.

April became aware that he was still frozen to his seat. Slowly he relaxed his muscles, let his body slump. He became aware of something else: His eyes were closed tight enough to hurt.

He opened them slowly, and as usual his eyes registered the view forward before his mind comprehended.

Black space flecked with colored suns.

They were home again.

Sarah April left the navigation console and moved slowly to his side. "The computer can hold us steady here. I didn't have enough navigation to be able to reprogram us from wherever we are, Bob. That may be a problem."

She nodded to where the seven-year-old Spock was sitting near the navigation station, staring back at them with precocious, wide eyes.

April's attention was still focused on the screen. "I never thought pure blackness could look so lovely." Finally he looked away, down, and embraced her as hard as he had the rocking command chair only moments before.

"We did it. We're back in our own universe again," he finally sighed, releasing her. Now he could turn his attention to Spock and the rest of the ship's youthful crew.

"The reverse aging process seems to have stopped, but I see no signs of rapid aging beginning. The effect apparently operates only in the negative universe."

"Does that mean they're all going to remain children?" Sarah asked.

"No . . . no, that doesn't make sense, either," he said thoughtfully. He gestured at Spock, who amiably gestured back. "I have no doubt that Spock, Captain Kirk, and the others will return to their normal ages naturally—but at our universe's normal speed.

"That would mean, for example, that Mr. Spock will have to grow up all over again. Unless . . ."

"The transporter records!" Dr. April exclaimed. "It retains the records of their original molecular structure. It *could* return them to the age they were when they last transported."

"It *c*ould," he agreed. "But the entire ship's crew . . . it will take some time. We're going to be busy for a while, my love."

"You think it will work, too, Bob?" She appeared uncertain now. "Hasn't it been tried before, and found not to? I seem to recall experiments. If it worked, everyone could have near immortality, simply by having their youthful selves recorded for transporting and then, upon aging, entering transporters to be reintegrated according to their preserved youthful records."

"Yes to everything you said, Sarah," April concurred. "But one exception should—*has* to—make a difference. Remember, the molecular structure of everyone on board has been altered by unnatural, extrauniversal forces. Those fountain-of-youth experiments with transporters weren't carried out on people who'd been exposed to the accelerated time-flow and radiations and who-knows-what of the negative universe.

"It's those molecular changes that should be reversible, Sarah. At least, the theory seems sound, if I remember my transporter mechanics correctly." He smiled. "As you say, it seems like yesterday. But we don't have to use the transporter, Sarah. We can remain young, live our lives over again. To be able to do that, have a second life—it was worth the trip to the negative universe and the difficulties of returning. We've found a true fountain of youth, Sarah—in mathematics and spatial physics, instead of an obscure plot of mythical topography."

"And all anyone has to do to make use of it," she said sadly, "is to have a great amount of daring and a ship that can travel

at warp-thirty-five. I'm afraid that our experience is going to prove unique."

"I'm afraid you're right, Sarah. Actually, we're not going to live our lives over again, are we? We're going to live a second life. That's good." He smiled, warm, loving, a together-understanding smile. "I wouldn't want to live the other one over again. I don't see how we could ever improve on what we've had already. No, Sarah, we've been blessed beyond any other people, been granted a special privilege. We mustn't abuse it."

"We didn't abuse it the first time around Bob. I'm not at all worried about a repeat performance."

April's theory about the action of negative-universe forces turned out to be correct. They started with the bridge crew, and breathed sighs of relief when the adult analogs reappeared to take the place of the children who had entered the transporter.

Each member of the crew exited from the alcove with a splitting headache. This was the only noticeable side effect—headache, and a uniform sometimes badly askew. Both ailments were easily treated.

It was slow going at first, carefully reprogramming according to old records and then reintegrating with equal care. But once the engineering officers had been brought back to true maturity, they were able to take over the task and proceed with greater speed and efficiency.

So it didn't take overlong for the *Enterprise* to return to normal strength, experientially as well as in numbers.

Kirk leaned back in the command chair and reflected on his brief but profound reentry into childhood. Everyone on board had reacted differently to the experience, and not a few were undergoing psychiatric outpatient treatment for traumas incurred as a result.

"I don't think we have any serious cases, Jim," McCoy had informed him. "But if you see any of the younger ensigns walking around sucking their thumbs, try not to be too harsh on them."

Once again it was McCoy whose easy humor had shattered a tense, potentially nerve-racking situation. Any lingering worries among the crew vanished in laughter as the good doctor's comment passed around the ship.

Most of the experience had faded to the memory of a distant dream for Kirk, but there was one resurrected bit of personal history that had stuck with him.

He had a picture of a small, feisty boy in preschool, with the instructor hovering over his computer terminal, bawling him out for running mock battles with the math keys instead of practicing computation tables.

"Jimmy Kirk, I've told you and told you," she scolded. "If you keep wasting your time with such nonsense you'll never amount to anything!"

"Something amusing, Captain Kirk?"

"Hmmm . . . what?" Kirk started, then glanced back and up at a youthful Robert April. "No, Commodore, I was just thinking that among your other numerous distinctions, you're now going to be regarded as the youngest commodore in the fleet. But of course, you're not. Let's see, extrapolating from your present recorded age, as opposed to your new actual one, I'd estimate that you can probably retire at the natural age of one hundred and thirty. That should give you over a hundred years in the service, Commodore.

"I'd give a lot to see what Starfleet accounting's going to do with *those* figures! Either they'll have to refigure the basis for computing pensions, or else you can retire tomorrow with a full commodore's pension and a whole lifetime to enjoy it in."

"There is a host of fascinating ramifications, Captain," April agreed. "But as you can guess, financial considerations are not foremost in my mind." He looked downcast.

"The Minerva Nova's not far from Babel. And we'll be there shortly. I know that should make me happy, Jim, but it doesn't any more. I don't care much about money." He looked up, and his sorrowful eyes bore into Kirk's own, the same light of deep space glowing in their depths.

"You, of all people, can understand what does."

Under pressure of that pleading stare, Kirk couldn't hold back any longer.

"Well then, I might as well tell you that we've been in contact with Starfleet ever since we regained control of the *Enterprise*. Naturally, they were most interested in the details of our journey into the negative universe. *All* the details, Commodore."

April looked at him unsurely. There was something in the captain's voice. "What do you mean, Jim?"

"Nothing . . . just that we received a reply from Starfleet headquarters, relayed all the way to us, which might cheer you up a bit. I'd intended waiting to reveal its contents until we were in orbit around Babel, but"—he shrugged—"I couldn't stand to see a young man cry.

"Lieutenant Uhura, would you repeat the message to Commodore and Dr. April?"

Uhura nodded happily. Like everyone else on board, she had come to regard the Aprils as fellow crew members rather than as distinguished passengers. So it gave her pleasure equal to Kirk's own to be able to read, "In view of Commodore Robert April's heroic actions aboard the U.S.S. *Enterprise* this stardate, the senior command is reviewing mandatory retirement regulations with special regard to the unusual circumstances surrounding Commodore April's present physical status.

"His earlier requests to remain in active service will be given priority reevaluation. End communiqué." She looked back across the bridge and smiled.

April said nothing, but Sarah's left hand slid smoothly into his right. His palm enveloped hers as naturally and reassuringly as a snowbank settles around a sleeping sled-dog.

"And I have more time to continue my research," she murmured. "Perhaps this time I can accomplish one or two things."

"Well, bravo," April finally exclaimed confidently. "Maybe now I can talk them into doing away with that idiot mandatory retirement age altogether." His voice rose with the zeal of renewed youth.

"Retirement shouldn't be a function of abstract statistics. By God, the Federation's got to realize that a person's ability isn't

automatically invalidated on a specific date."

"I'll support you on that, Bob," Kirk agreed, "and would even if I didn't see myself repeating your complaint a number of years from now."

"Insertion into Babel orbit in one hour fifteen minutes, Captain," Sulu reported from the helm. April looked resigned.

"Sarah and I had better get our things together, Jim. I may have to have some emergency alterations performed on my dress uniform."

"And I can't wait to perform some on *mine*," Dr. April added vivaciously.

April half-whispered the next words, but Kirk heard them clearly. "And, Jim, even if it wasn't too pleasant for the rest of you, thanks for the opportunity to be a starship captain again."

They turned to leave the bridge, and as they did so Kirk noticed that Sarah April was holding the brilliant, revived Capellan flower.

"Bob always did say that the *Enterprise* had the best crew in Starfleet. I see it's as true today as it was thirty years ago. Thank you for everything, Captain Kirk."

"Doctor April," he acknowledged softly. Then his tone brightened. "I always wanted to be a kid again. After having the chance, I can see I wasn't missing much." He gestured at the blossom. "I see your flower's bloomed again."

She was staring up at the contented face of the commodore, but she heard him. "Everything has, Captain," she murmured.

Kirk watched them until they had left the bridge. He turned and settled back into the chair. There was still a little time left before he would have to go through the rigors of donning a full-dress uniform and making inane conversation with boring but important people.

For now he could spend a number of pleasant hours doing nothing but staring at the exhilarating, lush blackness of the *real* universe.

As they neared Babel, he noticed Spock staring into apparent nothingness. Such abstract concentration was not

unusual for the first officer, however. Often his thoughts were his own best friend. But Kirk detected a hint of a peculiar expression crossing Spock's face from time to time.

Idly, he asked, "What did you think of your temporary return to the joys of childhood, Spock? You didn't age down to a squalling babe like most of us, so your memory of those minutes is probably stronger."

"Joys of childhood, Captain?" the first officer echoed diffidently. He assumed a firm, no-nonsense tone. "Childhood is a time of indiscipline, insecurity, and instability, both emotional and logical. From a physiological and informational point of view the experience was somewhat intriguing, but it was otherwise nonbeneficial. I would hardly call it a 'joy,' and I surely have no special desire to repeat it."

"Naturally, of course," Kirk muttered, taken a bit aback by his friend's logical appraisal of what, for him, had been a warm if confusing experience. "I suppose I agree with you. After all, that's the only rational way to look at it."

"Quite."

"By the way, what were you thinking of just now?"

"Captain?"

"A moment ago. You were wandering."

"I was . . . analyzing the experience in question and culling its scientific values."

Kirk seemed disappointed. "Of course, though it almost appeared once that you might have been talking to yourself."

"A not impossible phenomenon, Captain. I am not immune to subliminal vocalizations. It is merely rare in Vulcans. But I am interested. What did you think you heard?"

"Nothing that made sense," the Captain replied, repeating it slowly. "Ee-chiya—that's all."

"You are correct, Captain, nothing that makes sense." He returned his attention to his multitude of instruments, his readouts and gauges and illumined lists of scientific minutiae.

"It vaguely resembled an obscure Vulcan scientific term, nothing more. Nothing more . . ."

The astounding metamorphosis of the Aprils was the highlight of the ambassadorial gathering at Babel. Expecting

to honor an aged, white-haired couple, the conferees were shocked when the youthful pair presented themselves at function after stunned function.

All they met were shocked, stunned, and envious. Hopes did not fall even when inquiries into the transformation by friends old and new revealed the methodology necessary to achieve the radical alteration. None present regarded the dangers of diving into a nova seriously—old men have nothing to lose. It made some of them bolder than the rawest recruit.

The devolution of the Aprils would have one side effect. It would speed, with the aid of the charts provided by Arretian scientists, research into warp-drive technology.

Now immortality had become a question of getting rapidly from place to place, in order to get from time to time . . .

V

As it turned out, Kirk was spared the enervating agony of attending endless speeches, parties, and conferences. A Federation cruiser not on planned layover could not be permitted to languish unengaged at an idle port of call. Their job had been to deliver Commodore April and his wife to the conference. This done, it was only a matter of time before new orders were received.

Kirk kept a reluctant smile on his face as he took leave of various representatives on Babel.

"Emergency priority signal received aboard, Captain," Spock whispered to him. Kirk frowned, then reapplied the reluctant smile he had been artfully employing all afternoon.

"Sorry to have to run, Ambassador Werthel, Admiral M'aart, Dame M'arrt," he explained hastily to the little group. "Duty runs on its own timetable."

"Arr, yes," the ample mate of the Caitian admiral purred in remembrance. "How clearrly I myself rrememberr the time only a few yearrs ago when—"

"Yes, well, you'll have to tell me all about it, in full detail, the next time we can get together," Kirk assured her, backing smoothly toward the doorway. "Let's get out of here, Mr. Spock," he said feelingly, "before this smile cracks my face."

"A physiological impossibility, Captain, though the meaning is clear."

With mixed feelings Kirk reentered the bridge: relief at the return to comfortable surroundings (how that admiral's wife could whine!), but apprehension at what would prompt Starfleet to break in on a diplomatic conference.

"You're certain this was an emergency priority call, Lieutenant?" he asked Uhura.

"Yes, sir. I keyed the proper response code the moment I heard that you and Mr. Spock were back on board. The message should be coming through any second."

"All right, Lieutenant." Tap, tap, click, tap . . . He forced his fingers to freeze on the command-chair armrest, forced himself to listen to the quiet. "Mr. Spock, has the science section noted anything out of the ordinary in this region?"

"Negative, Captain. I ran a standard query through all subsections the moment I arrived back on board. Everything in this sector reports in normal and undisturbed."

"Call coming through, Captain."

"Um. Put it on the main screen, Lieutenant."

Kirk swiveled siightly as the screen cleared. Crisp with power, it showed the slight form of an aged Oriental seated behind a gleaming chrome desk devoid of ornamentation. Long white shoulder-length hair was combed straight back, and the creases in that young-old face seemed as fresh and as neatly cut as the lines of her uniform. Only the eyes of polished hazel revealed an intensity inspired by something other than age. They hinted at heavy burdens borne by generations. Only in the last few had those burdens changed from physical to mental.

A hand came up in casual, knowing wave. Three stripes decorated the sleeve.

"Greetings, Captain Kirk," a surprisingly strong voice said over the speakers and across parsecs.

Kirk's reply was one of respectful surprise. This he hadn't expected. "Hello, Commodore Sen. How are things at Starfleet Security?"

The commodore smiled wistfully. "Interesting, as always, Captain Kirk. Interesting and perpetually worrisome. And, as always, people rather than events cause the most trouble. For example, how do the names Van and Char Delminnen strike you?"

"At a vague angle, Commodore. Sorry, but I—"

"Excuse me, Captain, but I believe I am familiar with the persons in question. If memory serves me—"

"Doesn't it always?" Uhura murmured. Spock favored her with a mildly reproving glance.

"If memory serves, Van Delminnen was a Fellow of the London Institute for Theoretical Physics some years ago. A

research Fellow. His specialty lay on the fringe of what was known about the specific gravity of heavy elements.

"Apparently his brilliance was exceeded only by his unorthodox methodology, which was in turn matched by the volatility of his temperament. He withdrew from the institute amid a storm of accusations and counteraccusations. Dropped from sight . . . I recall the tape well."

"Nothing heard of them since?"

"The only information I have encountered, Captain, were rumors that he and his sister were living on an otherwise uninhabited moon in the Theta Draconis system."

"Your opinion of him . . . from the information you've encountered?"

The first officer paused thoughtfully for a moment. "Arrogant and harmless . . . a crippled genius, Captain, possibly mentally unstable."

"You are partially correct, First Officer Spock," the serious voice called from the screen. "Brilliant—decidedly. Unorthodox—yes. Mentally unstable . . . perhaps. But we have reason to doubt the 'harmless.' " She reached off-screen and consulted several sheets of plastic. After a cursory glance, she turned back to the visual pickup.

"Captain Kirk, a prospecting vessel whose specialty is searching out marginal deposits of valuable metals passed through the limits of the Theta Draconis system ten standard days ago. They were returning to mine a small deposit of polonium reported by the original drone survey of the system as existing on a continent of the ninth planet." She leaned forward.

"Instead of the ninth world, they found a previously unreported asteroid cluster of considerable mass. A similar cluster had also taken the place of the system's eighth planetary body. Simple calculations by the ship's computer indicated what you must already have suspected: The mass of the two asteroidal groupings very nearly equaled that of the two missing worlds.

"As you might imagine, they left the system without pursuing these unusual developments more closely, straining their engines to their limits.

"I am told," she continued, as the bridge crew listened in amazement, "that normal spatial phenomena can in no way account for this dual disaster. We must therefore assume that abnormal forces are at work. Combine this information with the detection of highly unusual, very powerful radiation emanating from the system's largest moon, which circles its fifth world—well, I hardly think I need to draw you a diagram, Captain Kirk.

"You see, Mr. Spock, the rumors were correct. The Delminnens have taken up residence in the Theta Draconis system. They have also seemingly taken to making small planetoids out of big planets.

"Starfleet is very worried, *I* am very worried. And since the *Enterprise* is the Federation ship nearest the Theta Draconis system, you too should be worried, Captain Kirk.

"You will proceed immediately to the system in question and establish contact with the Delminnens. You will invite Van Delminnen to return to Terra, where he is to be granted a permanent appointment to Starfleet Research at a generous annual stipend."

"Suppose," Kirk ventured, "Delminnen declines our invitation? He has no reason to hold any love for Federation institutions."

"In that unfortunate event," the commodore replied, "you are authorized to utilize whatever means you deem necessary to entice him and his sister aboard ship. Good luck, Captain Kirk."

The image vanished. "Transmission concluded, Captain," Uhura reported. "Standard recording procedures were in operation."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. I want that blanket authorization made part of the formal record." He turned to his first officer. "Mr. Spock . . . opinions?"

"A device capable of producing the effect described by the commodore seems beyond the capability of modern technology, Captain. Total annihilation of a planetary mass, yes. Selective disintegration, no."

"And yet it appears that Delminnen can do just that. No wonder Starfleet is concerned." Kirk turned to the helm. "Mr.

Sulu, set course for Theta Draconis Five. Warp-five. Mr. Arex, sound yellow alert. All stations will remain on same until the Delminnens are secured on board."

"You make those two sound like a dangerous weapon, Captain," Sulu observed solemnly.

"That's exactly how the commodore described them, Lieutenant. And that's exactly how we're going to treat them —at least until we find out what's been going on in the Draconis system . . ."

Great bands of orange, red, and yellow turned Theta Draconis Five into a monstrous ball of poisoned softness. Its hostile surface lay swathed in a fuzzy cloak of ammonia and methane, and it howled at the ether with wild, undisciplined radiations.

Records indicated that it was attended by seven satellites, one of which the *Enterprise* was currently orbiting. It was not the largest or the smallest, but it was surely unique, for it possessed a breathable atmosphere.

". . . and little else," Spock intoned, his eyes fixed to the gooseneck viewer. "Other than the livable atmosphere, there is nothing of interest on the moon, nothing to make it attractive to settlers. It has neither commercial nor military value."

"All of which makes it ideal for a would-be hermit like Delminnen," Kirk observed as he stared at the rust-colored globe and its startlingly white miniature icecaps. He touched a switch on the command-chair arm.

"Captain's log, Stardate 5536.8. We have arrived at Theta Draconis and established orbit around the habitable moon of the fifth planet, where we are hoping to encounter the elusive Delminnens and their mysterious weapon . . . if indeed it is a weapon, if it indeed exists.

"Personally, I am skeptical as to the existence of said device. But Mr. Spock has verified the appearance of two unreported asteroid clusters in the positions formerly occupied by planets eight and nine, so some immensely powerful force *has* been at work in this system." The captain closed down the log and looked to his left. "Initial report, Mr. Spock?"

The first officer looked across, his attention turned from his readouts. "Mostly desert, tundra or hot, with little free water. No indication of life more developed than the lower invertebrates. It's easy to see why the Delminnens selected this particular satellite. It offers nothing of interest to the most bored traveler."

"Then perhaps they won't mind leaving it so much. Lieutenant Uhura, see if you can raise the Delminnens. Try near the edge of the north polar cap—that appears to be the most hospitable section of this moon."

"Aye, sir." She turned to her instrumentation and responded after a surprisingly short pause. "Captain, I have made some kind of aural-visual contact already."

"They must have some detection equipment, then," Kirk noted. "Very well, flash the image on the main screen." He threw Spock a quick glance. "Get a fix on the transmitter's location and relay it to Transporter Control."

Spock moved to comply as Uhura struggled with her equipment. "The signal is weak but clear . . . there."

The figure that appeared was that of a shockingly young man: rail-thin, pale-skinned, with too-large eyes bordering a shark-hook of a nose. Straight sandy hair fell in hirsute drips across his face, and he brushed constantly, nervously at the strands.

"Who the devil are you and what do you want?"

Spock had moved to stand next to the command chair. "Sociable fellow, isn't he?" Kirk whispered to him, before turning to the screen and assuming his most pleasant tone.

"Good day to you, Professor Delminnen. I am James Kirk, Captain of the starship *Enterprise*, currently in orbit around your charming worldlet. I come at the urgent request of Star-fleet Command."

"I'll bet." Delminnen smirked, smiling at some private joke.

"I have been instructed to offer you, in the name of the Federation, a permanent research position in advanced physical theory at the Starfleet Institute itself, with all the honors thereunto attached." He kept a straight face as he added, "There has been considerable renewed interest in some of your early theories, you see."

And the later developments, Kirk added, but to himself only.

"May I have the pleasure of conveying your acceptance to Starfleet headquarters?"

"Just . . . just a minute, Captain," Delminnen said. "I need a moment to consider."

Those aboard the *Enterprise* waited while the figure disappeared from the screen. The lift doors slid apart, and Dr. McCoy entered the bridge. He looked from the now blank screen to Kirk. The captain put a finger to his lips as Delminnen reappeared.

"I have considered your words, Captain Kirk," he said, "and find I don't believe a one of them." His voice rose angrily. "Why should those scientific cretins at Starfleet suddenly have the desire, or the sense, to request my services? Why should they now wish to subject me to honor instead of ridicule?"

Kirk took a deep breath. "I think you know the answer to that, Delminnen. Evidence of your . . . experimentation in this system has reached command levels. Naturally, everyone is anxious to admire the development which—"

"I thought as much," Delminnen said. His smirk turned into a wide, unfriendly smile. "I just wanted to hear it out loud. *Admire* pagh! They want to steal my knowledge! They always take what they can't understand." He all but snarled into the pickup.

"You can tell those mathematical morons what they can do with their honors, Captain. And if you don't leave me and my sister alone, you'll find yourself the recipient of a demonstration of just how *admirable* my work here is."

Kirk stared quietly at the suddenly blank screen. "So much," he murmured softly, "for diplomacy. What do you think of our reluctant guest, Mr. Spock?"

The first officer considered. "A difficult speciman. I can understand how such a psychological type could produce peculiar theories, but it eludes me completely as to how he could translate those theories into anything practical. Yet it seems he has. We must handle him the same way one would store a photon torpedo with a sensitive detonator—forcefully but with great care."

"I concur. Order a security landing party to stand by in the Main Transporter Room."

"Armed, Captain?"

"Armed."

Spock rose and turned to leave, adding, "Then I think it best that I instruct those chosen myself, so that everyone is fully cognizant of the difficulties involved."

As the lift doors closed behind the science officer, Kirk turned to the still-silent McCoy. "What's your professional opinion of Delminnen, Bones?"

"You mean, does he appear sane?"

Kirk gave a twisted smile. "Nothing so obvious. What I want to know is . . . is he sane enough? Or is he likely to go off the deep end when we knock on his front door and ask him to accompany us?"

"Well, he's arrogant, suspicious, and possibly a borderline paranoid, but I don't think he's homicidal, Jim. And his arrogance is rather reassuring."

Kirk frowned in puzzlement.

"He's too certain of his own importance to be suicidal," McCoy explained.

"I hope you're right. In any case, you'll have an opportunity to make a firsthand diagnosis any minute. You're coming down with Spock and me."

"Me? What for?"

"Our orders say to utilize all necessary means to bring Delminnen and his sister back with us. If he becomes violent and we have to be less than tactful with him, I want you along to pick up the pieces." Kirk pushed against the arms of the chair and sighed resignedly. "Let's get it over with."

"Captain!"

Kirk turned from the lift to look sharply back at the helm. "What is it, Mr. Sulu?"

The helmsman was working hastily with a bank of instruments that had been silent the entire journey from Babel. They were all suddenly active.

"Detectors indicate another vessel emerging from the planet's shadow."

Kirk rushed back to his seat. "Identification?"

"Not possible yet."

"Mr. Arex, have you a fix on her?"

"Yes, Captain," came the gentle, whistling reply. "It is a capital ship, apparently non-Federation in origin."

"Full magnification on the forward scanners, Mr. Sulu."

The screen lit up, giving a view of the slowly turning gas giant. Suddenly the intruder seemed to leap forward, to show an irregular, though clearly artificial, shape outlined against the brilliant hues of the planet's dense atmosphere.

"That's a Klingon cruiser, Jim," McCoy declared.

"I can see that, Bones," Kirk muttered. "Mr. Sulu, sound red alert. Mr. Arex, align phasers to—"

"Receiving transmission from the Klingon ship, Captain," Uhura interrupted.

"Acknowledge their signal, Lieutenant." He turned an expectant gaze to the viewscreen.

The Klingon who appeared there was seated in his counterpart of Kirk's command chair, but his height was evident nonetheless. His attitude was one of relaxed attention—in fact, he very nearly slouched. Except for the tight set of his lips and the churning one might detect beneath unusually bushy brows, he appeared almost friendly. And when the image had fully resolved at both ends of the transmission, he even smiled.

"Well, well . . . it is true what is said about the false size of the universe. I have been expecting and dreading such a meeting for many years.

"How have you been, Jim?"

A soft sigh of air on the bridge came as several jaws dropped simultaneously.

"He called you 'Jim,' " McCoy finally whispered in astonishment. "You two *know* each other?" But Kirk continued to stare at the screen, ignoring the question.

"Hello, Kumara. It *is* you?"

"It is indeed none other, old friend. A strange place, after so many years, for a reunion, is it not?"

"Jim!" McCoy was fairly dancing with curiosity.

"Not now, Bones," Kirk replied firmly. His voice rose as he addressed the attentive figure on the screen. "Yes, it's a strange place for a reunion, Commander . . . it is 'Commander' now, isn't it?"

The figure smiled again and nodded.

"In fact, it's such a strange place that I wonder what you're doing here. This system is far off Imperial patrol routes."

The Klingon commander shifted in his seat. "A reasonable question, Jim. One which I might equally well ask of you. But since you inquired first . . . I have been instructed by the Imperial Resources Bureau to survey this system with regard to locating salvageable resources. While I will concede its greater proximity to the Federation sphere, you will recognize that it has not been formally claimed by your government. Therefore, we have as much right here as you.

"You are welcome to whatever you may find, though. With the slight exception of the sun-forsaken bit of sand you now orbit, our explorations have proven singularly unprofitable. There is practically nothing here worthy of Imperial attention . . . doubly true when one considers the distance to the nearest Imperial world.

"But enough of business!" The smile widened. "It is good to see you again, Jim. I invite you to share a container of Gellian *vitz* with me. Would you do me the honor of joining me aboard, say, ten of your minutes from now? Or, if you prefer, I can come aboard the *Enterprise*."

Kirk smiled in return. "No, your ship will be fine. The honor is mine, Kumara. I accept."

"I am gratified. Till then . . ."

Kirk's smile held until the Klingon commander's image had vanished. His expression turned grim, and he snapped at the chair pickup.

"Transporter Room—stand by to transport landing party. Mr. Spock?"

"Here, Captain," the reply came.

"Red alert was sounded because there's a Klingon cruiser in the area. All personnel are to transport down with one hand on their sidearms."

"Very good, Captain."

Kirk clicked off, and McCoy had to run to reach the elevator with him. "Why the rush, Jim? You can't possibly expect to get Delminnen and his sister off-moon in time to make your appointment with this Kumara."

Kirk's tone was low, curt. "Listen, Bones, Kumara may just be the best starship commander the Klingons have. You can bet your precision nerve welder the Emperor didn't send him this far from base to play prospector! I'll also bet that hypothetical bottle of Gellian *vitz* he mentioned that he's here because Klingon intelligence got wind of that Federation prospector's report. They're prospecting, all right—and if they get their hands on Delminnen, they'll mine him for all he's worth and they won't be too concerned about putting him back together when they've finished with him."

McCoy hesitated momentarily. "Jim, I asked you if you knew this Kumara . . . personally, I meant. You waved me off. Where do you know each other from so well that you immediately call each other by first names?"

"Is it that important, Bones?"

"Well, now, I don't know, Jim," McCoy said evenly. "When two enemy captains display a certain degree of familiarity unheard of in previous—"

"All right," Kirk broke in, turning to face the doctor. "Yes, Kumara and I know each other on an informal basis. Did you ever hear of the FEA, Bones?"

McCoy considered. "No . . . no, wait a second. The Friendship Exchange Action, wasn't it?"

Kirk nodded. "Remember what it was about?"

"Sure—it was well documented in all the psychology journals. Was set up during one of those brief friendly periods between the Federation and the Klingon Empire. Some bright medical theorist thought it might promote understanding between peoples if academy cadets from both cultures spent some time in close contact with one another. The program was limited to command candidates, if I remember right."

"It was and you do," Kirk acknowledged as the lift doors slid apart.

"Do what?" Spock inquired politely, and Kirk was forced to explain as he and McCoy entered the Transporter Room.

"Gentlemen, Kumara is one of the sharpest, smartest individuals I've ever met, and we can be thankful the Empire hasn't another dozen like him. He's also the only Klingon I've encountered who wasn't so puffed up with his own importance that he ignored his opponent's capabilities. And he expects us to believe he's here for casual 'exploration'!"

"Begging your pardon, Captain," Spock commented, "but this still doesn't explain how you come to address each other in so familiar a fashion."

"Oh, that. We were roommates, Mr. Spock." He led them into the transporter alcove.

Five armed crew members were already there, each standing at the ready on his respective disk. One small, dark-skinned man saluted as the three officers stepped up into the alcove.

"Ensign Gemas and landing party reporting ready, sir."

"Very good, Ensign." Kirk looked at the waiting group. "We may have to move fast . . . be prepared for anything."

Short, confident nods; a few muffled "ayes."

Kirk turned to face the console. "Scotty, I want you to stay with us at all times. Keep the transporter energized. If I'm right about our obliging visitor, we may have to come aboard in a hurry."

"No need to worry, Captain. I'm not movin' until you're all back right where you are now."

"Good. Try to set us down about fifty meters from the surface transmitter coordinates . . . in some cover, if information is sufficient to permit it."

Scotty manipulated the instrumentation, and Kirk saw him waver and disappear. He wondered if an armed Klingon would replace the tense figure of his chief engineer.

The security-team members were already drawing their phasers as they materialized. They landed light-footed, owing to the weak gravity, breathing short and fast in the thin air. A

few stars shone through the violet sky, and the immense globe of Theta Draconis Five hung like a baleful candy eye above the far horizon.

A few scraggly, ground-hugging shreds of greenish-brown resembling dying kelp shivered in the lee of well-worn boulders, offering the only defiance to the terribly-near sterility of naked space.

Sixteen eyes studied the unimpressive surroundings until they were satisfied as to its harmlessness. McCoy pointed to the east.

"There it is, Jim."

A low, rambling group of single-story interconnecting building modules thrust out of the sand nearby. They clustered near a huge metallic bubble like termites around a bloated queen.

Kirk sniffed at the odd, unsatisfying atmosphere. "Maybe I'm wrong," he muttered. "I hope so." He took a step toward the buildings.

Displaced air let out a soprano scream as a blue beam passed near his right shoulder. It struck a boulder behind, sending rock splinters flying. One crewman clutched at his shoulder as he spun to the sand.

"Take cover! Spread out and return fire!" Kirk yelled, even as he dove for the nearest clump of rocks. Spock was at his side, his phaser out and firing as he hit the ground. McCoy had hold of the injured crewman's legs and was pulling him to shelter, analyzing the man's surface wound at the same time.

Kirk peered around the left side of a hunk of basalt. The source of the beams was the near bank of a dry streambed. Silhouettes of the beam-wielders were readily identifiable. Phaser beams began to strike the edge of the bank, fusing sand and gravel and sending rock fragments flying. The Klingon landing party was well protected.

"It would appear that your initial estimate of Commander Kumara was correct, Captain," Spock observed as his beam singed the hair of a too-anxious Klingon.

"Yes. Still, it's not like him to assume a formal defensive position like this and slug it out. More likely we surprised him just as his party set down. Spock, if this fight goes against

him, I don't think he would hesitate to destroy the Delminnens to keep them and their device from falling into non-Imperial hands. I'm going to try to get them clear of that complex before the Klingons decide to blow it to bits. Give me all the covering fire you can."

There was a pause while the instructions were relayed to the other members of the landing party. Then they unleashed a furious burst of phaser firepower as Kirk dashed for the nearest wall of the modular cluster.

Something warm went by his right ear, humming like a wasp. He dove, rolled, and came up behind the wall of the outermost structure. A quick glance around the edge revealed that the Klingons were fully occupied with the rest of the *Enterprise*'s landing party.

Reaching up, Kirk felt his ear. A blister was beginning to form, so near had the beam been. But he still had all of him.

Sliding along the wall in an attempt to remain concealed from those inside as well as everyone outside, he finally reached a thick window. It took a moment to make the proper adjustment to his hand phaser. Then, using it like a torch, he carefully melted down the window plastic.

A cautious peek showed the interior of a comfortable, denlike room. It was dark and deserted. Resetting his phaser on stun, he put one leg over the sill and eased himself into the room. It was empty.

Kirk took out his communicator and flipped it open. Suddenly someone screamed.

Sound, left; door, closed; reaction—that which is quickest rather than that which is planned.

The door opened easily. At the far end of the half-laboratory, half-living quarters, Kumara was supporting an unconscious Van Delminnen while wrestling with a struggling woman. Her features were softer, less aquiline than Delminnen's, but the resemblance was unmistakable.

Kumara was juggling his communicator along with the two bodies. Looking up, he saw Kirk framed in the doorway and froze.

Thawing was rapid. "Up, fool," he shouted into his communicator. "Beam us up or it's your head! Beam—" He

was forced to drop his communicator in order to hold on to Char Delminnen.

Kirk was running toward the trio as they began to fade. "Scotty—up!" was all he had time to yell into his own communicator.

On board the *Enterprise*, Scott heard the brief command and spoke to his assistant. "Don't stand there like you've seen Loch Nessie, mon—let's get him up!" Sure hands commenced rapid manipulation of precision controls.

The figure of Kirk began to scintillate at the edges. At the same time, he threw himself, arms outstretched toward the three figures. Confused energies interacted in a brilliant display of condensed high-power pyrotechnics.

The reaction on board the *Enterprise* was smaller but no less spectacular. Lights that should have remained dark flashed brightly on the transporter console. Gauges which ought to have stayed quiescent suddenly danced as if afflicted by a mechanical Saint Vitus' dance. Sparks arched indecently from switch to closed contact and back again.

Scott's mind was in turmoil, but he held himself steady as he adjusted, realigned, and compensated, glancing nervously from the console to the still-vacant transporter alcove.

"Come on, Captain," he whispered tightly, "come *on*."

He shoved one switch forward another notch. Four jumbled, indistinct shapes began to form within the alcove. They flickered in and out like boat lights in a fog.

"Engineering," he called to the open directional pickup, "Main Transporter Room, Chief Scott speaking. I want all the power transporter circuits will carry—or you'll be carryin' it with your hands next time!"

He shoved the crucial control into the red. As he did so, the four shapes grew more distinct, almost materialized.

The control hit the far end of the slot.

Metal ran like water, and intricate components turned to blobs of expensive slag. Tiny popping sounds came from within the console's base.

Kirk and a young woman solidified. Simultaneously, the other two indistinct images abruptly disappeared. Kirk

wavered, his leg muscles rippling uncontrollably; then he collapsed to the floor, rolling out of the alcove. The woman fell on top of him.

"Captain!" Waving at the acrid smoke which now curled about the ruined console, Scott staggered around its edge, moving to a wall intercom. "Sick Bay . . . corpsman to the Main Transporter Room, on the double! Chief Kyle?"

"Here, sir," came the reply.

"Stand by second-level transporter . . . we've still got a landing party on the surface."

"Standing by, sir."

Spock studied the ravine ahead, turned, and called back to the rest of the team. "Cease firing . . . they've transported clear." He turned his attention toward the cluster of structures as a figure wriggled up alongside him.

"You think they've given up the fight, Spock?" wondered McCoy, his attention likewise riveted on the buildings.

"The fight . . . yes," commented Spock unsurely. "The war . . . I don't know. I wish I knew as much about this Klingon Kumara as the captain seems to. He may already be back on board . . . someone used a communicator a little while ago."

A tremendous explosion caused both men to bury their heads in the sand. Bits of metal and plastic and other non-metallic debris, mixed with sand and rock, rained down on them.

They looked up. When the dust and smoke cleared, they saw a small crater where the metal bubble and its attendant structures had stood.

McCoy looked questioningly at Spock. "If the captain's *not* already on board . . ."

Spock merely nodded, flipped open his communicator. "Spock to *Enterprise* . . . beam us up. What"—he stumbled over the words, an indication of how he felt—"what word on the captain?"

"He's aboard and all right, Mr. Spock," came the filtered burr of Chief Engineer Scott, much to the relief of both men. "But somethin' . . . I dinna know what yet . . . went wrong

with the transporter. Nurse Chapel is treatin' him. Stand by to beam up."

They materialized in a room different from the one they had left. Disorientation lasted only a moment; then Spock addressed the security team. "Ensign Gemas, dismiss your people. You," he said to the injured crewman, "report to Sick Bay and have that shoulder treated."

"Tell whoever's on duty to use the extractor, son," McCoy added. "You've still got some stone shrapnel imbedded in the muscle." The man nodded, wincing painfully.

McCoy, was the first to enter the rubble of the still-smoke-filled Transporter Room, saw the two seated figures propped against the wall flanking the alcove.

"Jim!" He hurried over to the captain, knelt, and looked at Nurse Chapel.

"Nervous shock, Doctor," she explained in a professional tone, "complicated by extended trauma of unknown origin."

"Thank you, Chapel. I'll take over here. Help her." He indicated the blank-eyed woman slumped against the wall, and Chapel moved to do so. Spock bent to study the woman also.

McCoy examined Kirk hurriedly, pulled a hypo from a kit Chapel had brought, and administered it. While he waited for the drug to take effect, he glanced curiously back toward the transporter console, where Scott and his assistant were busily examining its cauterized innards.

"What happened, Mr. Scott?"

The chief engineer stared a moment longer at the intricate circuit board—its fluid-state switches a mass of thin goo, its hundreds of microchips forming metal stalactites on its edge—and he shook his head dolefully.

"I dinna know, Doctor. One minute there were four figures beamin' in, then they'd fade almost to nothing, then grow solid again. In an' out, in an' out, no matter how fine we calibrated the resolution or how much power we poured into materialization. I finally decided to pull 'em in with everythin' we had. The captain came through all right and so did the young lady, but the other two, whoever they were, disappeared. Dinna ask me where to."

McCoy would have pressed for details, but Kirk was groaning and moving his head.

"Doctor," Spock declared with concern, "this one is not responding to stimuli." Chapel indicated agreement.

"Get a stretcher detail up here, Chapel, and have her moved to Sick Bay."

"Yes, Doctor." She moved to issue the necessary order. Spock leaned close to Kirk and looked up at McCoy.

"He's coming around. I don't know what happened to them when the transporter went crazy, but the effects were just this side of overpowering."

A pair of medical techs appeared with a wheelabout between them, and McCoy watched as the woman was gently placed on the mobile bed and rolled from the room.

Kirk let out a loud moan, diverting their attention.

"Captain, can you reason?" inquired Spock anxiously. "Do you know where you are?"

Kirk only groaned again.

Spock looked worriedly at McCoy. "What are the possible effects on someone held in transport for too long, Doctor?"

McCoy shrugged slightly. "No one knows for certain what happens to the mind in extended transport, Spock. Transporters used under normal conditions are foolproof. Under abnormal conditions, we just don't know enough about what actually takes place. There are two known cases of people who were in transport when there was an all-systems power failure, backups included. They were finally brought in, but in a coma from which they never emerged."

He looked back to Kirk, just as the captain opened his eyes and blinked. "Where are the others?"

At the sound of Kirk's voice, Scott left analysis of the ruined transporter console to his assistant. "Thank the saints you're all right, Captain."

"Thank *you*, Scotty." Kirk stood up, rubbing at his forehead. "You've heard of locking someone in a water-filled, lightless tank so that they experience near-total sensory deprivation, Bones?"

"I'm familiar with the therapy, Jim."

"Well, I just experienced the opposite extreme." He looked around the room. "Am I the only one who came through?"

"No, Captain," Scott informed him. "There was a young lady as well. And there appeared to be at least two other figures, but for some reason the transporter malfunctioned and we couldn't hold them." He looked at the deck. "I fear they've gone to where no one can find them."

"No, Scotty, and don't blame yourself. Your transporter didn't fail. Our friend Kumara was all set to have himself and the Delminnens beamed back to his ship while we supposedly sat around and waited for the big reunion. I inconveniently barged in on him as he was preparing to do just that.

"As soon as he saw me he ordered his techs to beam himself and the Delminnens up. I didn't have time to do anything but make the same request of you, Scotty, and take a dive for the three of them, hoping our transporter could overpower theirs. Looks like it ended up a tie." He glanced over at Spock. "I see you got back safely Spock. Casualties?"

"One injured, Captain," the first officer reported. "Not seriously."

"Good. Maintain red alert. Where's the girl . . . Char Delminnen?"

"In Sick Bay by now, Jim," McCoy explained. "She's suffering from shock also. I ran a quick test on her, and I suppose your shock was induced by the same thing. Some of your blood got switched around in all the transporting confusion—veins to arteries and vice versa. Your shock was induced by temporary oxygen starvation." He shook his head. "Wait till they read about that in the *Starfleet Medical Journal*."

"Will she be all right?"

"I expect so. She's probably coming out of it even as we're talking."

"Captain . . .?" Scott looked pensive.

"Yes, what is it, Scotty?"

"You'll pardon me for sayin' so, but you took the devil of a chance intersectin' transporter fields like that. No wonder everythin' went overload. You could've had a lot more than your hemoglobin switched around."

"I know, Scotty," Kirk replied solemnly. "I knew it at the time. But there was nothing else to do. At least Char Delminnen's safe."

"Wonderful for her," McCoy noted bitterly, "but the one we came for is either dead or, more likely, on board the Klingon cruiser."

"A situation we're going to have to rectify, Bones."

"Message from the bridge, sir," came a call from an ensign standing by the wall intercom. Kirk hurried to take his position.

"Transporter Room, Kirk here."

Sulu's voice was excited, tense. "Captain, the Klingon cruiser appears to be picking up speed. Indications are she's retracing her original approach."

"Lay in a tracking course, Mr. Sulu. Don't let her slow speed fool you—Kumara's trying to get into the shadow of the gas giant. If he can do that, he'll move to maximum speed immediately, before we can get a fix on him. Don't let him out of detector range."

"Yes, *sir*!"

Kirk moved to rejoin McCoy and Spock.

"What is it, Jim?"

"Van Delminnen's on board the Klingon ship all right. Kumara's now trying to sneak out of the system and run for cover. We're going after him, Bones."

"Was that indicated in the orders, Captain?" wondered Spock.

Kirk threw his first officer a hard look. "The orders were to bring back the Delminnens, Mr. Spock, utilizing whatever methods were necessary."

"A blanket authorization with regard to the persons of the Delminnens, Captain," Spock persisted, "but does that justify pursuit of an enemy ship?"

"They can quibble over the semantics later, Mr. Spock," Kirk declared. "*After* Van Delminnen is safely delivered to the nearest Starfleet base." He stalked toward the lift.

A sudden surge rocked them as the lift opened onto the bridge. Kirk moved immediately to his command position

while Spock took his place at the science station. McCoy hovered nearby, feeling helpless as usual, despite the benefits his presence always brought to a tense bridge.

"Report, Mr. Sulu."

"Captain, as soon as we started to move, they increased their speed slightly. I adjusted our own to match, at which point they accelerated again. Thanks to your warning, Mr. Arex and I anticipated it and matched velocity once more. We are still within detector range, traveling at warp-six." He checked a readout. "But we are not making up any distance on them."

"I didn't expect we would be, Mr. Sulu," replied Kirk. "They're certain to be traveling at their maximum safe speed . . . for now. That's going to have to change. Mr. Spock?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Did you discover anything in the Delminnen complex which might have been the weapon?"

"Unfortunately, we never had the opportunity to look. Do not look alarmed, Captain—neither did the Klingons."

Kirk relaxed visibly.

"The Delminnen residence, laboratories, and any conceivable weapon were completely destroyed by a timed device planted by the Klingons soon after you entered the outer structure. We were unable to prevent the destruction. Considering the manner in which the Klingons departed, it seems reasonable to assume that the device was intended to detonate with all of us inside the complex. It seems rather wasteful. I am surprised the Klingons did not attempt to recover the device itself."

"I'm not, Spock. Kumara never liked to take chances. Having captured one major piece, he opted to blow up the board. Obviously, he's convinced Delminnen can be persuaded to give him the plans for the device." He stared grimly at the starfield displayed on the main screen. "The Klingons can be most persuasive."

He paused, mulling multiples of light over in his mind. "Spock, what is the nearest Klingon military base of importance in this region?"

"A moment, Captain." Spock bent over the library computer and reported quickly. "According to what information we have, there is a naval base of considerable size on Shahkur Nine."

"Do we have coordinates for said world?"

"Yes, Captain. They are imprecise, however."

"Hmm." Kirk turned to the helm. "Mr. Arex, assuming Shahkur lies at the closest possible point given by those imprecise stats, compute the time we can expect to have before ships from that world could be expected to rendezvous with Kumara—and with the *Enterprise*."

Arex's triple hands worked busily at the navigation console, extrapolating from a simple yet crucial series of numbers. He expressed no worry, no excitement over the results. That was the Edoan way. Emotions were subdued, but not supressed as they were among the inhabitants of Vulcan.

"Assuming both vessels maintain their current velocity, Captain, I give us no more than forty-eight standard hours."

"Maximum?"

"Given the restrictions of questionable coordinates for Shahkur . . . yes. That figure is for vessels of the *Enterprise*'s class out from Shahkur. Lesser classes would take longer, of course."

"But we can't assume they'll send lesser-class ships." He glanced back at Spock. "This Shahkur Nine is supposed to be a major base, Mr. Spock?"

"Yes, Captain."

Kirk looked resigned. "Then we'd better assume Kumara will meet additional cruisers in a couple of days. That gives us very little time to rescue Delminnen."

"Or to kill him, Captain," reminded Spock quietly.

Kirk's voice was flat. "Or to kill him."

It was silent on the bridge for several of those forty-eight hours. Silent, but far from inactive, as Kirk and Spock considered the options open to them in the shrinking time available.

The stillness was too much for McCoy, finally. He had checked half a dozen times on the condition of the injured

security specialist and paid an equal number of visits to Char Delminnen—all a waste of time, as the specialist's injury was minor and Nurse Chapel had the woman under mild sedation.

"Well, what are we going to do, Jim? We could call for help ourselves, but that would bring a Federation fleet into contact with a Klingon force of possibly equal size. Then we'd have a nice little interstellar war on our hands."

"I know, Bones. That's why we're going to have to resolve this one alone, without help."

"If we run into three or four Klingon cruisers, it'll be resolved all right," McCoy observed sardonically.

"Captain," Spock began, "if I may suggest the obvious . . .?"

Both men turned to look at him.

"If we go to emergency power, we should be able to get within phaser range."

"All we need for that to work, Spock, is to have a normal, belligerent, cocky commander on board the Klingon ship. Instead, we have to contend with Kumara. I tell you, Spock, we can't apply the usual standards here!

"If we go to emergency power, you know what will happen? Kumara will laugh fit to split his collar. He would love to see us burn out our nacelles trying to get within phaser range. The moment we got close enough to tickle his tail, *he'd* go on emergency power and keep right on running until overload. Then we'd both drift along on impulse power with charred converters—straight toward Shahkur Nine and the oncoming Klingon relief force.

"As much faith as I have in Scotty and his engineers, I can't risk that." Kirk's brow furrowed. "But Bones is right. We can't continue on like this without trying something. Let me know, Mr. Spock, how this sounds to you . . ."

VI

There was quiet jubilation on the bridge of the Klingon cruiser. Everyone on board knew that the mission had been partly successful. And if the presence of the peculiar human on board wasn't proof enough, the presence of the trailing Federation cruiser was.

A certain amount of grumbling among the elder officers followed the commander's refusal to turn and engage their pursuer. Running away was alien to the soul of any Klingon warrior. But the younger officers harbored no such feelings, though they were as brave as their superiors. They realized that Commander Kumara's orders were best for the Empire, best for the ship and best for themselves.

So they contented themselves with the knowledge that their pursuer was traveling under the impetus of mounting frustration.

"Commander," the helmsman reported smartly, "the Federation ship is remaining constant relative to our position. Should we utilize emergency power to increase the distance between us?"

"I'm rather fond of our present distance, Lieutenant Kritt, and see no reason to change it. We will maintain our present speed unless we are *compelled* to do otherwise, and we will maintain it without straining our resources. Restrain from public exhibition of your foolishness, and think."

"I abase myself, Honored Commander," the helmsman replied as he strove to comprehend Kumara's point.

For his part, the commander continued his idle study of the viewscreen. His rear scanners showed the pursuing *Enterprise*, only a distant, barely moving dot against the blackness of space—space which one day would be a part of the Empire, as the Great Gods intended it should be.

"Lieutenant, there is a game humans play, a game Vulcans play. It is called chess. Ever hear of it?"

Kritt turned from his console, confident that the heathen Federation ship was still a safe distance behind, and succeeded in looking earnestly puzzled.

"A human game? Hardly, Commander. Why do you ask?"

"I suspected you had not. Few of us have, preferring to languish in contempt of anything not Klingon; and that is much to be deplored. You might look it up in the archives sometime. The knowledge would do you good.

"Were Captain Kirk and I presently to be engaged in such a game, I would say I have him dangerously in check, with the next move being his."

"Ah," observed Kritt, brightening, "it is something like *bagap*, then?"

Kumara considered, then indicated approval. "There are similarities, yes, though *bagap* is a much faster game. And chess is played with little wooden idols on a plastic or celluloid field, instead of with live slaves."

"It sounds very dull."

"Be assured, it is not." Kumara's manner shifted abruptly from one of casual camaraderie and introspection to that of the complete dictator. "Under no circumstances are we to engage emergency power unless the *Enterprise* does so first! Make certain all concerned understand this implicitly!"

"At once, Commander," Kritt shot back, relaxing now that his superior was once more the model of Klingon leadership . . .

"Kumara," Kirk explained to the attentive Spock as McCoy listened in, "is difficult to surprise, but there's no reason to suppose that his subordinates are anything other than the usual Klingon ratings. That means they'll be contemptuous, secure in their present tactical position—and overconfident. I'm hoping that will also make them just lazy enough."

"Lazy enough for what, Jim?" McCoy wondered.

"You'll see. Mr. Spock, have the shuttlecraft readied for departure."

Spock's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "The *shuttlecraft*, Captain?"

"That's right. Make certain it's fully fueled."

Spock moved to his library-science station and directed his words to the intercom pickup. "First Officer Spock to Shuttle Bay. Prepare Shuttle One for immediate flight." He looked back across at Kirk.

"Pilot and course, Captain?"

"There will be no pilot, Spock. The shuttle will run on automatics which will be guided by the *Enterprise*'s battle computer."

"Now I'm thoroughly confused, Jim," McCoy muttered.

"With luck, the Klingons will be too, Bones. Mr. Arex, set a course for the shuttle: zero degrees inclination to plane of present course." Then he recited a plot which even McCoy was able to recognize.

"But . . . that's *our* present course, Jim."

Kirk smiled back at him. "I'm not fooling anyone, you see. The simplest device is often the best. Everyone keeps an eye out for the least obvious." He addressed the chair pickup. "Engineering?"

"Engineering, Scott here. Are we goin' to make a run at them finally, Captain?"

"After a fashion, Scotty. I'm going to want every milligram of push you can coax out of those engines in a few minutes. We're going to have to push them right to the limit."

"You'll have whatever you need, Captain."

At the rear of the *Enterprise*, twin clamshell doors slid back to reveal a high, well-lit chamber—the shuttlecraft hangar. Tiny wisps of frozen air, missed by the recyclers, puffed out from the crack which appeared between the doors.

Spock listened for a moment, then turned to report, "Shuttlecraft One ready for launch, Captain."

Kirk took a deep, hopeful breath. "All right. Ready, everyone. Mr. Sulu, I want full emergency power."

"Aye, sir." Sulu activated the necessary controls. A steady, rarely heard whine began to build on the bridge as the *Enterprise*'s immense engines labored to comply.

On board the Klingon cruiser, Lieutenant Kritt suddenly bent close over his console and stared intently at the readouts from the rear-facing scanners.

"Commander, the Federation ship is closing on us!" He paused to check the information with the helmsman. "Reports confirmed—they are increasing speed rapidly."

Kumara frowned slightly, and peered at the growing dot on the viewscreen. He searched his mind for possibilities, but found nothing but groundless conjecture.

"I had expected something more elaborate from James Kirk. Even so, he is pressed for time. He must know we will contact Shahkur Base and request reinforcement soon." He barked an order at Kritt. "Prepare to go on emergency power."

Sulu was busy studying the information his own scanners were sending back to him. "We're gaining on them, sir."

"Speed, Mr. Sulu?"

"Warp-seven . . . coming up on warp-eight, maximum speed."

"Push her as far as she'll stand, Lieutenant."

Sulu shoved down the final switch, pressed the last button, and turned his attention to a bank of small dials. All were creeping steadily into the red at the end of each scale.

"Definitely closing on the Klingon ship, Captain," Arex reported with a touch of excitement.

"Engine temperature rising rapidly, Captain," Spock reported.

On board the Klingon cruiser, Kumara examined the flow of information and muttered into a pickup. "Stand by, Engineering. Not yet, Kritt," he added, noticing one of the navigator's hands hovering tensely over a control. "Learn patience and attain permanence."

"Converter temperature is nearing the melting point, Captain," Spock reported, not looking up from his instrumentation. "Coming up on phaser range. Shall I prepare to fire?"

"Negative, Mr. Spock." There was a beep at his arm. "What is it, Scotty?"

The chief engineer's worried voice sounded distantly over the speaker, distorted by the now deafening whine of the engines.

"Captain, we canna keep this up much longer without melting something critical!"

"Hold steady a bit longer, Scotty."

"A bit is all it'll be. Captain. Engineerin' out."

"Exalted Commander," a worried Kritt said, looking anxiously from his console back at Kumara, "they'll be within phaser range any minute."

"Gently, Lieutenant, gently."

Spock's tone never changed, only the information was modulated. "Engine temperature nearing the critical point, Captain." He turned and looked at Kirk, with an expression that said more lucidly than words, Do now whatever you've got a mind to do.

Kirk hesitated no longer.

"Launch shuttlecraft!"

Spock gave the order and reported promptly, "Shuttlecraft away and locked on course."

"Cut emergency power . . . reduce speed to warp-six."

"Reducing speed," Sulu responded.

"Engine temperature dropping rapidly, Captain," Spock announced. As he did so, the temperature on the bridge also seemed to drop noticeably.

"Engineering, report," Kirk said into the pickup. There was a long moment before Scott's tired voice replied.

"Engineerin' . . . We almost lost one of the dilithium chambers. You cut it mighty near, Captain."

"Sorry, Scotty. Had to. Congratulate everyone back there for me. For all of us."

"I will, Captain . . . as soon as they stop tremblin'. Engineering out." Scott clicked off, moved to the central console, and planted a wet kiss of gratitude on a certain gauge which had yet again moved him one minute nearer a comfortable retirement.

"What now, Jim?" McCoy wondered aloud, staring at the viewscreen. Their quarry was no longer a distant glowing pinpoint, but now a definite inimical silhouette.

"I'd estimate about five minutes, Bones." Kirk chewed his lower lip and tried to see deeper than the ship's scanners . . .

On board the Klingon cruiser, Lieutenant Kritt leaned back in his stiff, unyielding seat and spoke with satisfaction. "Commander, the Federation ship's position is once again constant with respect to ours. They are no longer closing distance."

If he expected his exalted superior to look pleased, he was disappointed. Sometimes Kumara could be as impassive as a Vulcan. The commander gave every sign of having expected the good news.

"I thought they couldn't maintain that speed much longer, Lieutenant," he commented easily, before turning his attention to the intercom. "Engineering, stand down. Emergency power will not be required." He looked back at the screen, murmuring half to himself, "Nice bluff, James Kirk, but you should know better than to try to panic me."

"Pardons, Commander," Kritt wondered, "but aren't we going to utilize emergency power to reopen the distance between our ships? They are extremely close now."

"Extremely, but not dangerously so, Lieutenant. Have you learned nothing? They could only have hoped to prod us into straining our own resources—something," he added smugly, "we will not do. So long as we remain out of phaser range, they might as well be a dozen system-units behind, for all the harm they can do us. Nor do I believe their vessel has the capacity to repeat that maneuver again before we are contacted by relief ships from Shahkur Base." He looked well pleased with himself.

"Then there is the delicious irony of the situation."

Kritt looked confused. "Irony, Commander?"

"Do you not see it? Fah! I am assisted by blind men. Not only has their attempt to pressure us failed completely, Lieutenant, but now they must bear the additional torment of following us at much closer range. Close enough for their scanners to read our registration numbers—close enough for them to sense our smiles, you see."

Kritt turned back to his readouts and studied them, his gaze shifting thoughtfully from the tiny unemotional figures back to the main screen with its portrait of the pursuing *Enterprise*. "I think I do, Commander. I think . . ."

Spock noted the latest readings of separation and reported, "The enemy vessel is maintaining course and speed, Captain."

"No evidence of increasing her speed?"

"No, Captain. Apparently they are content to remain at this distance."

"Good. Mr. Spock, prepare for remote converter override of the shuttlecraft's engine. Remove safeties and cancel fail-safes. Mr. Sulu, *now* you can energize the forward phasers."

Realization dawned on the helmsman's face, and he bent to the task gleefully. The purpose was slower in coming to McCoy; Spock had already guessed it.

"An excellent idea, Captain," the first officer commented approvingly. "It requires only that the Klingons act as Klingons. Given that, the possibilities for success are substantial."

"So *that's* it!" McCoy declared. "You really think it will change the status quo, Jim?"

"I'm hopeful, Bones. A lot depends on their instrumentation being so tied up with monitoring our every sneeze that they'll overlook an object the size of the shuttle. They know we're well out of photon-torpedo range—but the shuttle's engine is capable of covering a good deal more space.

"Of course, it would be a useless effort if Kumara's ship was undertaking defensive maneuvers. But it's not. They're simply cruising along an unwavering course."

"Shuttle closing on enemy vessel, sir," Arex reported.

Everyone on the bridge stared at the screen, trying to spot the minute spark that would be the shuttle. Detectors tracked it easily, though, where the naked eye failed.

At one end of the *Klathas*'s bridge an officer suddenly squinted, staring hard and uncertainly at an unexpectedly active screen, noting a small but potentially significant reading. It might be nothing. Probably was, in which case he risked exposing himself to embarrassment and ridicule.

On the other hand, if the instrumentation was doing its job . . . and mechanicals were immune to insult.

"Commander?" he finally said, electing to tempt the gods.

"Yes? What is it, Korreg?"

"Exalted One, I wish you would give your opinion of this. It appears to be a very oddly formed meteoric body which—"

Kumara barely had time to look startled before dashing down to stare over the scanner-control officer's shoulder. When he saw the activated screen and matched it against the reading nearby, he turned a light purple.

"IDIOT!"

Korreg winced, not sure whether he'd exercised the proper option.

Kumara didn't have time to enlighten him. That would come soon enough . . . perhaps lethally.

"Engineering!" he roared into the intercom. "Full emergency power—maximum thrust!"

"But, Commander," a hesitant voice replied, "you just said —"

"I want full emergency thrust immediately or I'll personally pull your eyes from your head, Kanndad!"

"Ye—yes, Commander! At once!"

"Captain," Sulu cried, "the Klingon ship is increasing her speed. They appear to be going on emerg—"

"Present shuttlecraft position, Lieutenant!" Kirk barked, cutting the helmsman off.

"Shuttle is nearing critical radius, Captain," Sulu reported, more in control of himself now, though the tenseness remained in his voice. "Wait . . . distance is increasing. Klingon cruiser beginning to pull—"

"Spock! Exercise engine override—*now!*"

The first officer touched a switch. Kilometers of circuitry sent a single, brief signal to the racing shuttle, still traveling ahead of the now slowed *Enterprise* at her launch speed of warp-eight. The on-board shuttlecraft computer was simple compared to the massive machine mind on board the starship, but it was fully capable of interpreting that concise command.

A few relays opened, protesting controls were ignored, normal modifiers were shunted aside as the shuttle obediently self-destructed. As it did so, a stunning flash of white radiance momentarily blinded the *Enterprise*'s forward scanners.

The effects of that silent explosion on the *Klathas* were somewhat more extreme.

"Report, Mr. Sulu," Kirk demanded, mentally crossing his fingers. "Status of Klingon cruiser?"

The helmsman double-checked his instrumentation to be certain before announcing, "She's losing speed, Captain . . . dropping below warp-seven . . . below warp-six. We're moving into phaser range."

"It worked, Jim," McCoy observed, a note of satisfaction and admiration in his voice.

Kirk didn't sound enthusiastic. "We don't know how well it worked, Bones. The range was extreme, and expanding even as I gave Spock the order. We've obviously disabled her, damaging her engines, but her offensive weaponry may still be intact and fully operational. Now comes the difficult part."

"You mean attacking?"

"No. Trying to convince Kumara that he's got to surrender. Stand by forward phasers and torpedo banks. Mr. Sulu."

"Standing by, sir," replied the helmsman firmly.

Emergency ventilators were rapidly clearing the *Klathas*'s bridge of smoke and dangerous freed gases. The sounds of coughing and the crew's gasps for decent air provided an

unnerving accompaniment to Kumara's efforts to regain the command seat. He had been ungently thrown from that position when the shuttlecraft's engine exploded.

Painfully, he hauled himself to a sitting position in the chair, favoring the arm he had fallen on. A careful yet rapid survey showed that the bridge was still operational and casualties were minor.

What it was like at the rear of the *Klathas*, the place that had borne the brunt of the concussion caused by superheated gases and vaporized solids, he could well imagine.

"Speed . . . speed is still falling, Commander," a battered Kritt reported slowly, feeling his bruised jaw with one hand. Kumara activated the intercom and was gratified to find that it worked perfectly.

"Engineering, damage report." Silence shouted back at him from the stern of the ship. He tried again. "Engineering, this is your commander. Kanndad, what's the difficulty back there? I need this ship back up to speed in ten *aines* or I'll have you all fed to the converters!"

A worn, rasping voice finally replied. It was tinged with a vaguely insubordinate sarcasm. "Kanndad here Captain. We've sustained major damage to both engine nacelles. This ship won't make good cruising speed for several hundred *aines*, *if* the damage is repairable at all, and *if* most of my key personnel haven't been too seriously injured. What happened?"

"Never mind that now," Kumara told him irritably. He did not take note of his engineer's sarcastic response. He didn't have time for such luxuries. "Other than the drive, what is our power status?"

Kanndad turned silent again, apparently consulting someone out of pickup range.

"Eighty percent, Commander," he finally reported. Kumara took some comfort from that announcement. They were crippled but still armed.

Kritt spoke into the nearly clear atmosphere. "Federation ship closing to battle range, Commander." A pause; then, "They are transmitting."

Kumara could guess the nature of that transmission. Well, if Kirk thought the *Klathas* was drifting helplessly, he had an unpleasant surprise in store.

"I can see that she's closing, offspring of a worm's slave. As to the transmission, we'll answer it all right. Arm all rearward projectors and fire at will. And, Korreg, for once in your misbegotten life, see if you can hit something smaller than a blue star. Full power to the defensive screens." He stared at the viewscreen, which now clearly showed the ominous form of the approaching *Enterprise*.

"It is just," he muttered, too softly for anyone to hear, "that a ship of fools be commanded by a fool."

But if they survived the coming fight, he vowed, Kirk would not fool him again . . .

VII

Sulu carefully noted the sliding dial which indicated battle position relative to their quarry. "Inside range, Captain."

Kirk hesitated. He had no idea how badly the *Klathas* was damaged or how many serious injuries her crew had already suffered. "Uhura, any response to our transmission?"

"Not yet, Captain. Possibly their own communications have been damaged."

"Possibly. Or Kumara could be—"

A dull *crump* sounded, and the bridge was rocked by a wave of energy. Lights flickered momentarily before steadying.

"We've absorbed a full attack from the Klingons' rear projector banks, Captain," Spock informed them. "Our screens are holding tight."

"Returning fire, Captain," said Sulu, adjusting massive instruments of destruction with delicate fingers.

Kirk half smiled. "That's our answer. I should have known Kumara would choose to open negotiations in his own way. What's their speed, Lieutenant?"

Sulu checked a different set of readouts. "Holding at about warp-five, Captain."

"We have to reduce their speed still further," Kirk instructed everyone. "Otherwise, we'll simply fight a running battle until the ships from Shahkur meet up with Kumara. We have to weaken him significantly, weaken him to the point where he'll have no choice but to surrender. We have slightly more mobility, Mr. Sulu. Use it."

"Doing my best, sir," the thoroughly occupied helmsman responded. "We'll cut them down."

That section of space was filled for the next hour with a hellish display of barely controlled energies, beams of blue and red piercingly brilliant through the stark blackness. Occasional eruptions of lambent cloud appeared on the

exterior of each vessel whenever offensive probing beams contacted the argumentative energies of a defensive screen.

Sulu used the *Enterprise*'s superior speed carefully, teaming with the ship's battle computer to confuse the Klingons' retaliatory efforts while optimizing the *Enterprise*'s own attacks. There was little the Klingons could do to compensate. If they lowered their speed to throw off the *Enterprise*'s attacks, they conceded even more mobility to the Federation ship, gave her battle computer another chip to play . . . and, most important, lengthened the time between themselves and the Shahkur rendezvous.

At 62.24 minutes into the running battle, a phaser beam partially penetrated a severely strained defensive screen to strike one of the *Klathas*'s engine nacelles a glancing blow. That glancing blow killed twenty technicians and wounded as many others. The local damage was extreme.

Kumara knew they had taken a considerable hit from the wrench it communicated to the bridge. This time he managed to hold his position.

"Kanndad . . . Kanndad!" he yelled into the intercom. It gave back only a threatening crackle.

"Communications to that part of the ship temporarily out," Kritt reported. "Working to reestablish. Secondary engineering reports left converter potential critically damaged by phaser fire. We're going to lose more than half our remaining speed. Engineering reports that unless total engine shutdown occurs within five *du-aines*, to permit repairs, all light-multiple drive capability will be lost."

"When primary engineering communications are reestablished, instruct Engineer Kanndad to do his utmost, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir," a disgruntled Kritt acknowledged. "Maintaining fire. Shifting to compensate for weakened screen."

Kumara heard the words, looked at the faces of his immediate subordinates, and knew that unless they effected a drastic reversal of the present battle conditions, he would be forced to surrender or ship-suicide.

Undoubtedly, Kirk would be prepared for any new tricks. Very well, then . . . he would try an old one.

"Attention, all stations."

Harried, dispirited faces turned to look at him as he activated general intership intercom, sending his voice throughout the battle-weary vessel.

"Attention. Burial details and all nonoffensive-action personnel. You will begin a complete canvass of the ship and gather all nonessential items—repeat, gather all nonessential items. Strip your cabins, the corridors, storage chambers of anything and everything not integral to life support or ship operations." His voice darkened.

"I am being generous in not including certain personnel in this classification. However, if this order is not efficiently complied with, that may change.

"All items are to be collected and transferred to the Auxiliary Landing Craft Hangar. Life Support Station: You will prepare to vent surplus atmosphere through surface vents in conjunction with the ejection of surplus material via the landing-craft hangar." He checked his wrist chronometer, reading it through the scratches which now covered its face.

"Ejection of material and atmosphere is to take place in . . . three-quarters *du-aines*. It will include any personnel remaining in the lock, so I strongly suggest you move rapidly. Your commander and officers salute you, warriors of Klingon!"

He switched off and turned, to see the bridge complement hard at their stations, continuing the fight. All but Kritt, who was eyeing him expectantly.

"We cannot outrun them any more, Lieutenant," Kumara explained, "nor does it appear we will be able to make contact with the relief force in time. Therefore, everything on this vessel except the crew is going to commit suicide. My own private stock of Gellian *vitz* included."

Kritt almost asked, "To what end," then decided that it would become evident. The predatory gleam in the commander's eyes, however, was more encouraging than any words could have been.

The time arrived. "Auxiliary Landing Craft Hangar reporting," came a voice from one of the bridge speakers. "Ejection of material accomplished."

"Surplus atmosphere discharged," came the word from Life Support Control.

"Now," Kumara said to the general intercom, "all power to everything but minimal life-support systems is to be shut down."

"But, Commander," Korreg protested as the lights on the bridge began to dim, "what about our projectors, our defenses?"

"I said *everything*, Lieutenant." He turned his gaze to the main screen. "I only hope they don't decide to take the easy way out. I am depending on Captain Kirk to act like a human . . ."

Spock's eyebrows twitched once as the new information appeared on his readouts. "Captain, detectors indicate that the Klingons are losing their internal power. Defensive screens fading."

"I'll say," said an exuberant Sulu. "That last burst went right through her starboard-crew section."

"Cease fire, Mr. Sulu!" Kirk ordered quickly. "I'll not fire on a helpless ship . . . not even a Klingon's."

"It could be a trick, Jim," McCoy commented cautiously.

"Yes, it could, Bones." Kirk studied the small image of the *Klathas* thoughtfully. "But you heard what Sulu just said . . . apparently, we can penetrate her weakened screens at will. Though I wonder if—"

"Sir!" There was an undercurrent of excitement in the helmsman's voice. "Detectors indicate the *Klathas* is trailing a large amount of metallic and plastic debris."

"Confirmed, Captain," Spock announced. "I have also noted a steady stream of frozen atmosphere leaking from several locations on the cruiser's exterior."

Elation reigned on the bridge, mingled with exclamations of satisfaction. Only Kirk—and Spock, naturally—betrayed no sign of pleasure.

"Well, what are we hesitating for, Jim?" McCoy finally asked. "They're in no condition to argue surrender terms."

Kirk shook his head slowly. "I don't like it, Bones. It's too sudden, too easy. One minute they're fighting with everything they have, and the next, without being struck a severe blow, they seem to be coming apart."

"We can't tell how much running damage they've suffered, Jim."

"Maybe not, Bones." He made a decision. "Lieutenant Uhura, try to raise the Klingon bridge." Uhura moved to comply. She looked back and shrugged slightly several moments later.

"Negative, Captain. Their communications are dead. I can't find evidence of any activity, not even on-board closed transmissions, not a hand communicator . . . nothing. That ship's as mute as a coffin."

Which it could very well be by now, Kirk mused. But to be *certain* . . . how to be certain . . .

"The *Klathas* is losing speed rapidly, Captain," Arex indicated. "Dropping below warp-five . . . warp-four . . . continuing to lose speed, sir."

"Stop looking so glum, Jim," McCoy said. "They're the ones experiencing all the trouble, not us."

"It certainly looks that way, Bones." He sighed. "All right. Take us in close, Mr. Sulu. Keep your phasers trained on her bridge and bring us in just outside of transporter range."

The *Enterprise* promptly cut her own speed to match that of the rapidly slowing *Klathas*. The eyes studying this gradual shift were equally intent on both sides, but the glint of eagerness lay in those on board the Klingon cruiser.

"That's right, Captain Kirk," Kumara was murmuring softly, watching as the dim screen showed the *Enterprise* edging cautiously nearer, "come close . . . a bit more, that's right. No need to hurry. We'll have our reunion yet . . . minus the *vitz*, I fear."

Spock abruptly did something that he did only on rare occasions: He raised his voice. "Captain, preliminary analysis of the debris from the Klingon ship."

"Go ahead, Mr. Spock."

The first officer paused to recheck his information. It was nonspecific, general, but, for all that, of dangerous significance. "Sensors indicate that the detritus consists of personal possessions, supplies, spare fabricating material, and assorted other non-vital equipment."

"So?" an uncomprehending McCoy blurted.

"Not only is there nothing of vital concern to ship operations present, Doctor, but the drifting material appears to be wholly intact and undamaged."

Fact and reason formed critical mass in Kirk's whirling mind. "Mr. Sulu, initiate full evasive maneuvers, and fire at—"

Sulu's hand never reached the helm controls. Something loud and unyielding threw him sideways, slamming him into Arex's station. The Edoan navigator, thanks to triple limbs, managed to remain in his seat. Few of his companions succeeded in doing likewise.

Further explosions rocked the bridge, sending unsecured reports flying and tumbling the crew about like quicksilver on glass.

Quite without warning, the awesome barrage ceased.

Slowly, positions were regained. Reports began to come in from various stations around the bridge. They were not encouraging. The bridge illumination had dimmed considerably.

Other concerns were uppermost in Kirk's mind, however. "Mr. Sulu, Mr. Spock, report on disposition of enemy vessel."

Sulu had to compensate for several no longer usable instruments. Eventually he reported, "They have continued to drop speed, Captain. Apparently they are moving to operate on impulse power alone. Indications are that near-normal internal power has returned."

"Odd. Comments, Mr. Spock?"

"Sensors indicate that they have failed to reestablish other than minimal defensive screens, Captain. No sign of projector activity. This would seem to indicate that they have sustained major engine damage and have been compelled to shut down

their drive to effect repairs. Our own speed is, however, dropping even more rapidly than theirs."

"At least they're not leaving us," Kirk muttered. "That's something, anyway. I concur with your assessment of the damage they must have suffered, Spock. Otherwise we wouldn't be here talking about it now. Kumara must have exhausted his power reserves with that last attack."

"Excuse me, sir," Uhura broke in. "Damage reports are beginning to come in from all levels. Decks Four through Seven indicate extensive though minor instrumentation damage. Firecontrol reports heavy damage to all phaser banks and photon-torpedo banks. Rear phasers are marginally operative, but the firecontrol computer has sustained major damage. Dr. McCoy reports . . ."

Kirk looked around at that. He hadn't even seen Bones leave the bridge.

". . . numerous minor injuries, mostly abrasive and concussive in nature. Several serious cases. He reports that he's preparing to supervise surgery."

"What about your own station, Lieutenant?"

Uhura checked her telltales and finally declared, "All deep-space Starfleet frequencies are inoperative due to broadcast-antenna damage combined with power loss. Local and on-board communications systems functional . . . if we don't get hit like that again."

"I don't expect we will, Lieutenant," he told her tightly, blinking as full illumination was restored to the bridge. He turned to study the battered shape of the *Klathas*. It seemed as though he could detect laughter drifting across the intervening space, floating right through the screen. That was impossible, of course. He told himself that as he waited for the most important report of all, the one which would determine their subsequent actions and options . . . if indeed they had any of the latter remaining.

The laughter refused to go away.

Even the beep of the chair intercom was a relief, though he knew he couldn't expect any good news. He was right.

"That you, Scotty?"

"Aye, Captain." The chief engineer was standing at an auxiliary intercom station, watching busy specialists wrestling with battered components. His own previously sterile suit was laden with grime and colored liquid from fluid-state switches that now conducted only his disgust.

"D'ye want it all at once, or in installments?"

"Let's have the worst of it, Scotty." Kirk readied himself.

"That last projector hit was the worst, sir. Played hell with and damaged—never mind the details. I'll have a list of damaged components and material—and personnel—transferred forward soon as I get the chance.

"Simply put, we've got no warp-drive capability. Impulse power, yes, but we canna go nowhere verra fast for sometime. That's a minimum estimate. I hope you haven't got any pressin' engagements, Captain."

In spite of the grim report, Kirk managed a smile. "I'll send my regrets where necessary, Scotty. Do the best you can. If it's any consolation, the Klingons are apparently as badly damaged as we are. They're not going anywhere either. How's ship power?"

"Adequate for anythin' you want to try, Captain," the chief engineer declared reassuringly. "I heard about what happened up in Firecontrol. Too bad. The rear phasers'd work, if we had anythin' to work 'em with. Cut up the Klingons like veal on a butcher's block."

"We're not going to cut even that with those phasers for a good while, Scotty," Kirk reminded him. "Right now I'll settle for some mobility."

"Give it to you as soon as we can, Captain."

"I know you will, Scotty. Bridge out." Kirk searched his thoughts for a course of action, aware of the concerned glances the bridge personnel surreptitiously threw him . . . and found nothing.

"Summary and suggestions, Mr. Spock?"

The first officer replied smoothly, as though the consequences of near annihilation were an everyday event. "Engines dead, phasers inoperable, life-support systems sufficient. We can't run, we can't fight, but we are going to

continue to exist . . . unless repairs to the *Klathas* outstrip our own. Until then . . ."

"Stalemate," Kirk decided, staring at the viewscreen.

On board the *Klathas*, Engineer Scott's counterparts were working furiously to remove twisted bits of metal, to cut away burned out components and circuitry so that the arduous task of replacing them could begin.

Kumara was there himself, surveying the damage. He moved easily among the destruction, accompanied by Engineer Korreg and Lieutenant Kritt, offering a word of encouragment here, a blistering insult there—whatever seemed appropriate to accelerate the work.

He thought of Kirk, and worried as he fumed. "It's not going fast enough, Korreg."

"I abase myself, Exalted Commander. My head is yours . . . but my technicians are working as fast as they are able. There is much structural damage. It must be removed, cut away, before actual repair can begin."

"I'll cut off some extremities if replacement of damaged instrumentation doesn't commence within a hundred *aines*, Engineer. Tell them that. Perhaps it will stimulate their muscles, if not their minds."

"I will tell them, Commander," and Korreg hastily departed from the vicinity of the commander.

Kumara turned suddenly on the attentive Lieutenant Kritt. Kritt cringed—needlessly, as it developed. The commander had started at a sudden thought, not from any desire to heap abuse on his subordinate.

"Have the human Delminnen brought from the restraining chamber to the bridge. I'll meet you there."

"At once, Commander." The lieutenant turned to go, then hesitated. "It may take a few moments to . . . ah . . . restore the human to presentability."

"So long as he's coherent and will remain so. And for the *Sequa*'s sake, tell those in charge of him that this is no ordinary human. He is a valuable property and is to be treated

as such . . . or I will match their living conditions and treatment on board with his."

"Yes, Commander." Kritt hurried down the corridor while Kumara made his thoughtful way back to the bridge.

As it turned out, Van Delminnen appeared well able to manipulate both body and mind, though the former was not undamaged. But Kumara's warning had been delivered. The two husky guards who half carried, half dragged the slight human onto the bridge handled him with appropriate care.

Delminnen shook himself free of his captors, who gladly let him go—the feel of the soft human being difficult to stomach. He glanced around the bridge, his head moving rapidly, quickly, like a bird hunting for an especially ripe bug in the bark of a tree. His gaze settled contemptuously on Kumara, who gazed back with interest.

Kritt moved angrily from his station to stand next to Delminnen. "Bow in the presence of the commander, weak one!"

Delminnen's head went back slightly, prompting Kritt to raise a furious fist.

But Kumara waved the lieutenant olf. "No, no, no, Kritt! How many times must I tell you to utilize your head for something other than shoulder ballast? Leave the poor creature alone. In your justifiable anger you might accidentally mortally damage it. Then how would we obtain the information we seek? One cannot coerce a corpse. Return to your position and continue to monitor the *Enterprise*. That is where my concern lies—not with this single human."

"As you command, Exalted One," Kritt muttered disappointedly. "But the disrespect—" Throwing the imperturbable Delminnen a vicious smile, he turned and stalked back to his station.

Kumara waited until the lieutenant was seated. Then he clasped his hands together around one knee, leaned back slightly, and struggled to execute an earnest grin—which for a Klingon was no mean feat.

"Now then, Van Delminnen . . . It has come to the attention of the Empire that you have developed a device based on new scientific principles which seems capable of reducing normal

worlds to collections of drifting debris. I hardly need impress upon you that we would regard the possession of such a device by a government unfriendly to ours as threatening in the extreme."

"Whereas," Delminnen countered sarcastically, "if it were given into your protection, everyone could rest assured that it would be used for the benefit of all."

"Naturally."

"You're a liar—and worse, an unimaginative one."

There was a violent bang as of flesh on metal and some loud murmurings behind Kumara at that unpardonable insult. The commander turned and barked sharply, "Officers of the *Klathas*, attend to your duties!" Then he turned back to Delminnen and continued to smile amiably.

"Very well, since you doubt our motives . . ."

"I don't doubt them one bit," Delminnen sneered.

". . . let me rephrase the situation. You must concede that the Federation would utilize your device for similar purposes should they gain control of it. They will offer you little in return. On the other hand, you are my prisoner. Rather than be disagreeable, if you turn over the plans for your device to us, I will swear on my ancestors that you and your sister will be safely—"

That promise brought a sign of concern from the human, whose steel exterior showed the first indications of cracking slightly.

"Char . . . she's on board too?"

"Why, certainly," Kumara admitted, with commendable swiftness. "You don't think we'd separate the two of you, did you?"

Delminnen looked understandably suspicious. "She wasn't with us when we materialized in your transporter."

"Naturally not," Kumara agreed, his mind working as fast as only Kirk knew it could. "The *Enterprise* tried to snatch both of you from us. To compensate, we had to use two transporters. Your sister boarded the *Klathas* in the other one."

"Then why haven't I seen her?"

"She experienced some minor injuries when materializing in an awkward position. At the moment she is resting quietly and comfortably in our infirmary chambers. My chief medical officer informs me that she can have visitors in another day.

"Of course, I don't *want* to keep you apart any longer than that, Van Delminnen. But if you insist on being obstinate, you'll discover that I am a master of obstinacy.

"Should you decide, logically, to cooperate, you will be provided with a luxurious and private abode in an environment of your own choosing. You will have the facilities of a fully equipped laboratory, all the materials you require, and a free hand to spend the rest of your lives carrying out any kind of research you desire. Your privacy will be guarded and assured, and within the limits of the Empire you can come and go as you wish. Anything else you desire you have only to request." His voice rose in an excellent imitation of hearty good fellowship.

"Come, come, man . . . would your own government offer you as much? Or would they put you off with a modest stipend and a warning to take care with what you study? What say you?"

Delminnen locked eyes with the commander. His reply was jerky, nervous, as was all of his speech, but there was a firmness to it nonetheless.

"I say it's mighty peculiar for you to be so accommodating and generous to the helpless prisoner from a race you despise. And if you were as confident of eventually obtaining the information you want, by one means or another, you wouldn't be so anxious to secure my agreement. I know the *Enterprise* has been following your ship." He crossed his arms with an air of finality. "I think I'll wait a bit before agreeing to anything. There are developments yet to be seen."

That was too much for Kritt. Despite Kumara's order, he was out of his chair, all but snarling at this infuriating example of a lower order.

"Let me have him for a few *aines* in the persuasion chambers, Most Exalted. I'll show him the folly of attempting to dictate to a Klingon commander."

"Please, Lieutenant." Kumara sighed irritably. "I am conducting the interrogation. While I might agree with your desires, emotionally, your suggestion is premature. Have you not studied this creature? I have done so, while he has been babbling.

"While possibly a veritable genius, he is obviously, like so many of this kind, mentally unstable. Torture might send him into a catatonic state from which his mind—and the secrets locked therein—might never emerge.

"In that case, I would find it necessary to have the questioner—yourself, for example—executed. I should prefer not to. At times you have shown yourself to perform somewhat less incompetently than your compatriots. Do return to your station."

Thoroughly disgusted both with the situation and with the commander's attitude toward it, Kritt returned once again to his position. He sat there fuming quietly and thinking of what he would do to the human if he were in Kumara's place.

"Van Delminnen," Kumara said, "I cannot understand your attitude. Even for a human, it is exceptionally obtuse. Let us try this—a communication between yourself and Captain Kirk which we monitored earlier showed you emphatically refusing him even permission to land. If you hate him and the Federation he stands for, which has so grievously and wrongly mistreated you, why not spite them all by turning your knowledge over to us?"

Delminnen drew himself up in a self-conscious pose of pride and arrogance—a very Klingon thing to do, in fact. "My genius," he informed Kumara, "is not for sale to the highest bidder. You all desire my knowledge, yet none of you is sufficiently intelligent to know how to ask for it." He smiled in a strange way—strange even for him.

Kumara was mildly amused, but not by the smile. "You have a novel way of rationalizing your insanity, Delminnen. Too novel for me. I haven't the time to probe it just now. Rest assured that there will be time for everything." He looked to the guard on the scientist's left.

"Convey him to Karau in Humanoid Psychology—perhaps they can figure this one out. And tell them not to damage him beyond what is absolutely necessary."

"It shall be as you say, Commander," the guard replied. The guards took hold of Delminnen, despite his protests, and escorted him from the bridge.

Kumara turned thoughtfully back to the main viewscreen. He hadn't really expected the human to be sensible and agree to the inevitable. The only time his demeanor had altered was when his sibling had been mentioned. If she were on board now, it would be a simple matter to use her as a lever with which to topple Delminnen's stubbornness.

But she wasn't on board. She was out there, somewhere in the bowels of Kirk's ship, and Kumara did not think Kirk would be so foolish as to permit him access to her.

Still, he had Delminnen. It might take longer, be a bit messier, but eventually they would pry the information out of him—provided they all weren't vaporized first.

With his mind he tried to bridge the gap between ships, reach across to the tiny bump at the apex of the cruiser's saucer which he knew housed the ship's bridge. He reached out and tried to penetrate a single mind therein.

What are you thinking, acquaintance of my youth, he mused to himself. How will you proceed? We are even with our guesswork now. Whatever happens next could be decisive. Whence will it come, and when it does, will the gods permit me to escape again?

The trouble is, James Kirk, I know you too well—and you know me. How does one fool a mirror . . .?

"I wonder what Kumara's thinking now, Bones." Kirk's gaze remained fixed on the screen, which still showed the image of the damaged Klingon cruiser.

McCoy's reply was bitter: "Probably laughing himself silly over the way he suckered us into that last barrage. Sitting in his command chair, watching us bleed and snickering to himself."

"How are things in Sick Bay?" Kirk asked, aware that the anger was directed more at the result of Klingon bellicosity—the casualties the ship had suffered—than at Kumara himself.

"Better than we deserve, Jim. If the one projector that did most of the engine damage had struck at a broader angle

instead of slant-on, we could have suffered a blood bath back there. As it is, there are half a dozen specialists and one ensign who'll be lucky to pull through."

"If they're not dead already, they never will be, Bones. Not with you hovering over them."

"I wish I had your confidence in me, Jim." He glanced down at his wrist chronometer. "She ought to be here by now. I told —"

"Captain . . . Dr. McCoy?" Both men turned to face the elevator.

Two people had just emerged. One was a medical specialist. The other was Char Delminnen. She looked pale but otherwise none the worse for her wrestling match with transporter energies. The resemblance to her brother, Kirk noted, was amazing. A few slight changes in bone structure here, a movement of skin, and they could have been twins.

She was looking with interest around the bridge. Eventually her gaze settled on Kirk, and she inspected him with the same thoroughness with which he had regarded her.

The specialist marched her over, saluted, and waited for McCoy's instructions.

"Report, Mendez."

"All vital signs strong, body functions normal. No evidence to indicate delayed-time reactions. Mental condition stable."

"All right, you can go, Mendez," McCoy told him. "Tell Nurse Chapel to keep me posted if any of the casualties on critical show signs of deterioration."

"Yes, sir." The specialist saluted again and left the bridge, leaving Kirk and McCoy free to appraise Char Delminnen for the first time.

And they were in for a hard time, Kirk reflected, if she was anything like her brother.

"How do you feel, Ms. Delminnen?" McCoy ventured. Her gaze rested briefly on the doctor, then turned immediately to Kirk. He found her voice unexpectedly light, almost musical. But it was as adamantine as her brother's.

"Captain, where is Van?"

Kirk glanced for approval to McCoy, who nodded once. "She's as sound as I can make her, Jim. You might as well tell her."

Her attention shifted confusedly from McCoy to Kirk and back again. "What is this . . . what are you talking about? Isn't . . . isn't Van on board this ship?"

Kirk raised a placating hand and turned to indicate the screen. "I'm afraid I have to tell you he is not, Ms. Delminnen. Unless we're much mistaken, he's on that one."

They waited, McCoy watching her anxiously while she stared silently at the disabled Klingon cruiser. There was no scream, no violent outburst, not the slightest hint of hysteria. But her next words were whispered.

"I see. The Klingons got Van and you got me." She turned abruptly to look accusingly at Kirk. "Have you been in contact with them? Do you know if he's all right?"

"We've been in contact all right," Kirk explained patiently. "We've been fighting a running battle with them for much too long. Both our ship and the *Klathas* have been disabled. At the moment it's a race to see who can repair their engines first.

"As to your brother, we've had no word from the Klingons. They haven't volunteered any information, and we haven't had time to request any—not that they'd be inclined to make comments about anything other than our theoretical ancestry at the moment."

Char Delminnen turned her eyes to the deck and sighed. "Ever since our parents died and we were farmed out to foster parents, Van and I have never been separated for very long. We see things too much the same, too well, to look elsewhere for companionship." Her eyes turned up to him, and they were haunted.

"I don't know how he'll react if we're kept apart very long. In many ways Van is still a child. You've got to find a way to return him to me, Captain Kirk!"

The fury behind her request took both men aback. Though he had no reason to be ashamed of their efforts thus far, Kirk found himself squirming under that demanding gaze.

"We've been risking the ship and our lives to do just that, Ms. Delminnen. I don't think you need worry too much. Your brother's extremely important to the Klingons as well as to us. You can bet they're being careful not to harm him." He did not think it would be diplomatic to discuss the ultimate steps they were prepared to take to keep Van Delminnen and his device from falling into the Empire's hands.

Char Delminnen relaxed physically at Kirk's assurance, but her words, as she turned away slightly, were still filled with fury . . . and bitterness.

"And all this has happened because of that stupid discovery of his. I told him some interloper might discover evidence of its use. I *told* him! But would he listen?" She shook her head slowly. "That child—the universe is his playpen." Her head snapped around, and Kirk found himself confronted by that accusing stare again.

"That's the only reason you're interested in us, isn't it? You're no better than the Klingons."

Kirk bridled. "I think we, and the Federation—*your* Federation, Ms. Delminnen, whether you like it or not—are entitled to better than that. As for personal concern, comparing us with the Klingons is akin to—"

"Yes, that is the reason," Spock interrupted. Kirk threw his first officer a look of reproach.

"Thank you, Mr. . . . Spock, isn't it? I appreciate your honesty. At least I'm sure of where I stand."

"We could express more concern for you," Spock continued, looking up from the library computer console, "but you and your brother make it exceedingly difficult for anyone else to be interested in anything *but* your work."

Kirk's look of reproach vanished, and he saw that Char Delminnen had no reply to Spock's accusation. All she could do was shrug.

"So Van and I are jealous of our privacy. We didn't ask for visitors. We didn't inflict ourselves on you. It was the other way around."

"So it was," Kirk agreed firmly, "but you invited this visitation whether you'll admit it or not. Yes, our primary concern is the device—and why shouldn't it be? Do you realize

what the Klingons will do, what they'll be able to demand, if they gain possession of a weapon so destructive that—"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, don't you understand?"

Kirk and McCoy looked at her askance. "What do you mean?"

"The device . . . it's not a weapon."

VIII

Clearly, there were those on the bridge whose attention was not focused solely on their tasks of the moment, for the general shock this comment produced spread beyond Kirk and McCoy.

"Wait . . . I think I understand you," Kirk finally began, speaking in a soothing, calming manner. "It's all a matter of semantics. Very possibly your brother did not regard his invention as a weapon. You must see, however, that to an outsider any device which is capable of obliterating an entire world . . ."

"Yes, yes . . . but you have to know, Captain Kirk, it was never conceived as a weapon. For all his intransigence, Van could no more develop a weapon of destruction than he could moderate a diplomatic conference."

"If destroying planets isn't an offensive gesture," wondered McCoy, "then what was this machine's intended purpose?"

"You know that this system is exceptionally poor in usable metals? That was a major reason why it was never colonized, not even outposted."

McCoy looked blank. "So?"

"Van got the idea for a device which would enable orbiting vessels to mine such metals at depths previously thought impossible, and from great distances. It involved the calculus of stress in ways I don't pretend to understand. I'm not sure anyone but Van could understand them.

"It sounded like a grandiose absurdity at first, but Van became obsessed with the thought. He neglected all our other projects, threw himself wholly into this one. You have no idea, gentlemen, what Van becomes when he is obsessed with an idea."

"I can imagine," ventured McCoy.

"He doesn't eat, he doesn't sleep—he exists to work. He exists *on* work. And eventually he produced the concepts needed to make the device a reality." Her grim visage

lightened in remembrance. "How excited he was, how thrilled, how expectant! This was the discovery which was going to refute his critics. This was to bring him the recognition forever denied by petty, less talented men." She slumped.

"What else is there to say? You saw the results for yourselves. We tried the finished machine out on kilometers-deep nickel-iron deposits in the mantle of the ninth planet. The result was destructive beyond all imagining. Van was appalled, then furious . . . at the machine and at himself. He reworked, recalculated everything. He found no mistake. By his calculations, the machine should have worked as it was.

"I tried to dissuade him from making another test." She laughed disconsolately. "Try to extinguish a sun. So we aimed the machine at iridium deposits on the eighth world . . . with identical results.

"Do you wonder, Captain Kirk, Dr. McCoy, at the manner in which he greeted you? It was his failure infuriating him, not your presence. The latter he could stand, but not the first. That's why he refused to cooperate.

"But you've got to believe that Van intended no harm to anyone. He's no world-smashing monster. He wanted to produce something that would vindicate him, yes, but also to create something which would benefit Federation peoples." Abruptly the hard shell splintered and she was pleading.

"Get him back, Captain Kirk, please get him back! Without me he's no danger to anyone, except himself."

"Ms. Delminnen, while it may come as a shock to you, we *are* concerned about you and your brother in ways other than mercenary. As Federation citizens, and as individuals, it's our duty to protect you. Even if your brother had produced nothing of value, the mere fact that he's a Federation citizen would probably have impelled us along the same course of action we're following now."

"And after you've got him back, assuming you can do that . . .?" she asked, in control of herself again.

"That will have to be decided by the Federation Council. I'm only a starship captain, you know—not the all-powerful manipulator of others' lives you seem to think I am."

She stared at him a moment longer. "Though I have absolutely no reason to do so, I find myself believing you, Captain Kirk. I realize, however, that you'll be forced to destroy the Klingon ship—and my brother—if you fail to recapture him."

Kirk looked surprised—he thought he had avoided the need to mention that final, fatal possibility altogether. He hadn't counted on this woman's perceptiveness—it was almost as if she'd read his mind.

"We don't intend . . ." he started to mumble, and then decided to be as forthright as she was. "You understand, then, that we simply cannot . . . *cannot* permit the Klingons to rebuild your brother's device."

Char Delminnen's reaction was unexpected. She was momentarily speechless with shock. "Oh, but don't you see . . . didn't you know?" she finally explained. "They *can't*."

Now it was Kirk's turn to be shocked. The rest of the bridge was equally stunned. "Maybe you ought to elaborate," he said slowly.

She began to pace excitedly back and forth, waving one hand animatedly as she spoke. "I thought you had done your research, studied us thoroughly. It seems in your haste and anxiety to recover the weapon, both you and the Klingons neglected to trouble yourselves much with its creators. Yes," she half shouted, forestalling McCoy's unvoiced comment, "I said *creators*. You've no idea how Van worked, do you?"

Kirk glanced over at Spock, who looked blank and shook his head negatively, once. Char Delminnen turned smug.

"Van couldn't build a toy truck, let alone anything as complicated as that machine. I told you how close we are. We always work together. Don't you remember me telling you that he was neglecting our projects? *Ours!* Van gets an idea into his head, spins it around, clarifies the theory—and then I draw the diagrams and execute the finished product. He conceives, I construct. It has always been like that.

"After all, I'm the one with the degree in practical engineering."

"Mr. Spock?" Kirk eyed his first officer expectantly, but Spock was already working at the library computer. Shortly he

turned and spoke softly.

"Historical records confirm the body of Delminnen's report."

"I see." He turned his attention back to the still-pacing woman. "What you're saying, then, is that your brother is incapable of duplicating the machine?"

"Duplicating! They couldn't construct a primitive crystal set from Van's instructions! I'm the only one who can understand his verbal and mathematical shorthand. The two of us make one genius, Captain. Separated, we're merely two competent technicians."

Kirk turned thoughtfully to the viewscreen and studied the still driveless *Klathas*. Soon he began to chuckle. The sound rose, concurrent with Spock's eyebrows, became a chortle, than a laugh.

"Jim!" McCoy stared at his friend. Spock was equally puzzled.

"Really, Captain. I hardly consider the information the young lady has recently imparted of such a nature as to—"

"I'm . . . sorry, Spock . . . Bones." He regained control of himself. "Forgive me, Ms. Delminnen. I wasn't laughing at your brother's plight, or at your concern. It's just so . . . so . . . I can't help but visualize Commander Kumara's expression when he pulls what you've just told us out of your brother, when he discovers that in all this haste and confusion, he's the one who should be chasing *us!*"

The situation they were now in suddenly dawned on McCoy. He too chuckled. Spock reguarded this display of emotion coolly.

Almost as coolly as did Char Delminnen: "I'll be in the cabin Dr. McCoy assigned to me, Captain. If and when you have additional questions, or have rescued my brother, you'll find I'm available."

She turned and marched pompously to the elevator. Kirk turned to McCoy.

"You're going to leave her to herself, Bones?"

"She's as healthy as I can make her, Jim. She and her brother may both need treatment, but not of a physical

variety." He shook his head slowly. "What a family . . . so much talent enveloped in so many neuroses."

Kirk turned and saw the rest of the bridge crew listening attentively. "What are you all staring at? Don't you have stations to man? In case some of you aren't aware of it, this ship is on red alert and in the midst of an ongoing battle. Or perhaps there are some among you who . . ."

The level of activity on the bridge rose rapidly.

"Mr. Spock, your estimation of how soon repairs to the *Klathas* will be completed?" The first officer bent to his console. He looked up calmly several moments later.

"It is difficult to evaluate the damage to the enemy vessel with much accuracy, Captain. Judging from the information available through the library, combined with that obtained by our sensors, however, I should say that they will complete minimally necessary repairs to their engines well ahead of us."

Kirk double-checked with Engineering and found that Scott confirmed Spock's analysis.

"All right, Scotty, do what you can. Kirk out." The captain sat back and considered their situation. If the *Klathas* were allowed to run under warp-drive for even a short time while the *Enterprise* remained comparatively immobile, they would lose contact with her completely. There had to be some way to prevent that. Phasers and photon-torpedo banks were inoperable owing to the damaged firecontrol computer; impulse power would be useless . . . they had to stick with the *Klathas* somehow.

Stick with . . .

"Mr. Arex."

"Yes Captain?" The Edoan navigator responded promptly.

"I need a report on the status of the tractor beams."

"Just a moment, sir." Arex checked his console, tried a few switches, and found they responded as programmed. "Instruments indicate that all tractor units are intact and capable of full function, sir. Power leads to Engineering are undamaged, and all other subsidiary instrumentation appears functional."

"Thank you, Mr. Arex." Down went the intercom button. "Scotty . . ."

"Aye, Captain, what now?" the chief engineer wondered. "If it's about the drive . . ."

"Not this time, Scotty. How would it affect your repair work back there if I had to request maximum, sustained power to the tractor beams?"

"The tractors?" Scott hesitated only long enough to mentally retrace one diagram out of several thousand locked and filed securely in the manual of his mind. "Not at all, Captain. That's an independent power link. I can give you all the attractive force you want."

"I'll hold you to that, Scotty," Kirk told him thankfully. "We may need it all." He clicked off and snapped an order to the helm. "Mr. Sulu! Prepare to engage the *Klathas* with all forward tractors. Use near full power, one unit below maximum."

"Aye, sir," Sulu responded. "Should I attempt to close the distance between us?"

"Negative, Mr. Sulu. Maintain present disposition. We're close enough for effective tractor work. I don't want to move in to where Kumara can use portable weaponry against us. Since we can't go anywhere until Mr. Scott's people have repaired the drive, I just want to make sure the Klingons can't go anywhere without us."

"Prepared to lock onto enemy vessel, Captain," Sulu reported. "All forward tractors powered and standing by."

"Engage, Mr. Sulu."

The helmsman gave the necessary electronic order. There was the briefest pause before a slight quiver was felt on the bridge.

A jolt was felt on the bridge of the *Klathas*. Kumara looked up as Kritt reported, "Commander, sensors indicate that the Federation vessel has—"

"Locked onto us with her tractor beams," Kumara finished for him. "I don't require mechanicals to confirm that for me. It

was an obvious desperation move." He eyed the drifting *Enterprise*. "I only wonder why it took them so long."

Five *aines* passed before Kumara's chair intercom buzzed for attention. "Report yourself," he said to the pickup.

"Engineering here, Exalted Commander." There was a touch of exultation in Korreg's exhausted voice. "I am pleased to report that we have restored partial drive capability."

A shrill battle cry broke out on the bridge at these words. For once Kumara decided to ignore the breach of discipline. The men could do with a little enthusiasm.

"Remember, Commander, we have only partial capability. Our speed and maneuverability are still severely limited."

"I understand, Korreg. It will be enough, I think. My commendation to you and your personnel. At the successful completion of this mission there will be honors for all. I salute you."

He turned from the intercom to an uncertain Kritt. "But, Exalted One, there is still the problem of the *Enterprise*'s tractors."

"Must I constantly be afflicted with reminders of the obvious?" Kumara moaned. "Am I forever to be oppressed by relentless idiocy? Worm's offspring, product of a misaligned mating, can you see no solution to anything save what is written already? Prepare to get under way!"

"At once, Commander!" a rejuvenated Kritt responded. The rest of the bridge crew bent to their own tasks happily, secure in the confidence expressed by their commander's renewed good mood.

Sulu's attention was caught by the sudden activation of long-quiescent readouts. "Captain," he announced anxiously, "the *Klathas* appears to be increasing speed."

"Confirmed, Captain," Spock declared evenly. "They are approaching velocity beyond the ability of impulse power. It would seem that they have their warp-drive working again."

"Mr. Sulu," Kirk inquired, "report on the status of all tractor linkages."

The helmsman hurriedly checked the appropriate telltales and reported steadily, "Tractors all holding firm, sir. No sign of weakening, and all instrumentation operating efficiently."

"Mr. Spock, compute energy output of the *Klathas* and compare with her rate of acceleration." Spock did the necessary figuring and announced a figure. Kirk relaxed a little. "They've regained only partial use of their drive, Spock. By the time they can complete their repairs, according to your estimates of the damage they've suffered, Mr. Scott should have restored our own engines back to equal operation. That means full use of our weapons systems as well, since the firecontrol computer is expected to be fixed at the same time." He looked satisfied.

"Then we can restart this argument on an equal basis again . . ."

Lieutenant Kritt looked up from his console, some of his initial enthusiasm at the return of drive capability now dampened by what his readouts told him.

"We are approaching warp-speed, Commander, but we cannot exceed it by much until further repairs have been completed by Engineering. We do not have enough power to break the *Enterprise*'s tractor lock on us."

Kumara remained relaxed, confident. "Not with sheer speed we do not, Lieutenant."

"Your pardon, Exalted One?"

"Pay attention, Kritt." Kumara's voice rose to reach every attentive ear on the bridge. "Pay attention, all of you. We will execute the following course changes, and execute them with utmost precision. And in so doing, we will finish this absurd contest once and for all . . ."

There was no panic on the *Enterprise*'s bridge when evidence of the initial Klingon maneuver was reported by her detectors.

"Captain," Sulu declared promptly, "the Klingons are shifting strongly to starboard, running at a considerable angle now to their previous course."

I wonder what Kumara is up to, Kirk thought.

"It seems strange, Captain," Spock announced, obviously puzzled. "They have the benefit, however temporary, of warp-drive capability. I should think their proper course of action would be to make as much distance toward their base at Shahkur as possible before we regain use of our own drive and weapons."

"I agree, Spock. That's my thought too. Possibly Kumara is trying to trick us again, trying to convince us there's Klingon aid closer but in a different direction." He began to be concerned. It wasn't like Kumara to try anything so transparent.

"Mr. Spock, you're certain the Klingons have no military facilities nearer than Shahkur?"

Spock utilized the library briefly. "Absolutely nothing, Captain. Shahkur is at the extreme fringe of the Empire. And the Klingons do not normally patrol this region in force, so I think it extremely unlikely they have contacted another ship."

"He's up to something," Kirk muttered.

At that moment a slight quiver ran through the bridge. "*Klathas* has executed another radical course change, Captain," Sulu reported. "Approximately forty-five degrees to port of their new course."

"Tractor status?"

"Still holding tight, Captain," Arex announced quietly. "We're staying with them. No change in disposition."

Another quiver rattled the bridge. It was slightly stronger this time.

Sulu's voice rose slightly. "Now they're shifting to starboard again."

On the screen Kirk saw the *Klathas* nearly vanish to the right before scanner compensators realigned her in the center of the screen. Simultaneously, a strong jolt rocked the bridge so hard that Uhura had to grab the arms of her chair to keep from being thrown free.

"Shifting again, Captain!"

"Steady, Mr. Sulu." He was on the intercom instantly. Now it was obvious what Kumara was up to. The question was . . . could they do anything about it?

"Scotty, have you restored any drive capability yet? Anything at all?"

"No, Captain," the chief engineer replied. "And"—his voice was momentarily drowned out as the next shock rocked the *Enterprise* and forced Kirk to brace himself against the arm of the chair—"we're not goin' to have any if this infernal shakin' gets any worse. What the devil's goin' on up there?"

"It's the Klingon ship. Kumara knows he hasn't regained enough power to break free of our tractors, so he's playing crack-the-whip . . . with us on the snapping end."

"The colloquial identification is obscure, Captain," Spock firmly declared, "but the physical theory cannot be quarreled with. If this continues, the centripetal force will soon be sufficient to overpower our tractor beams and break the *Klathas* free."

Kirk didn't have to cut the intercom—the next shock did that. This one was severe enough to send sparks flying from several consoles and knock two momentarily unbraced specialists to the deck.

McCoy stumbled over to the command chair and grabbed the back for support. "Jim, we can't go on like this. If it gets any worse, it won't matter whether the Klingons break free or not. I'm receiving injury reports already, from all over the ship." Another jolt sent him spinning to the floor, despite his hold on the chair back.

"Captain, I must concur with the doctor," Spock insisted, struggling to retain his own position. "Calculations indicate that much additional stress will begin to affect the ship's hull. Even the strongest seams cannot take—"

"All right, Spock!" Kirk's mind churned furiously. There was no time for careful consideration of possible alternatives, no time to judge possible reciprocal effects of his idea.

Besides, it was his only idea. The trouble was, it could affect them as severely as it did the Klingons.

Another shock struck as the *Klathas* slammed over to a new heading once more. The tractors still held, a credit to their designers. Unfortunately, human beings were not nearly so solidly constructed.

Kirk climbed painfully back into the command chair, every millimeter of his body bruised and strained. Only Arex, with his triple limbs, had succeeded in retaining his position during that last shock, but even he appeared shaken.

Lights flickered momentarily, then came on strong. The next time they might not. "Mr. Spock, I want a half-second countdown to the *Klathas*'s next projected course change. They have to maintain a set pattern of changes for maximum effectiveness."

"Fifteen, fifteen, fourteen, fourteen . . ." Spock recited in a monotone, not questioning the reasoning behind the command.

"Mr. Arex, on command you will disengage tractor beams for the minimum amount of time possible, then reengage. Do you understand?"

"No, sir . . . but standing ready." One finger hovered over the button in question, still with inhuman control.

". . . Nine, nine, eight, eight . . ." The first officer continued to count, his voice never wavering.

"Stress on the exterior plates is nearing the danger point, sir," the ensign at the engineering station reported tensely. Kirk ignored him, his gaze locked on the screen, where the *Klathas* was sliding rapidly to starboard again, his attention focused on Spock's count to the exclusion of all else.

". . . Four, four, three, three, two, two . . ."

"Whatever you're going to do, Jim, *do* it!" yelled McCoy.

". . . One, o—"

"*Now, Arex!*"

The Edoan's finger descended, firmly depressed the switch controlling the forward tractors, allowed it to rise, then depressed it again. The action was almost too fast for a human eye to follow.

Several things happened at once. A tiny dial on Arex's console barely quivered. A tremendous force wrenched at the *Enterprise*. It sounded as though every bit of metal—every plate, beam, wire, down to the fillings in Scott's back teeth—vibrated in protest. This time the lights stayed out. The only

illumination on the bridge was provided by the brilliant display of sparks which arced from one outraged console to another.

Transparent facings on gauges and dials shattered, and everyone, including Arex, was thrown heavily to the deck.

Kirk had only a glimpse of the screen as he was thrown clear of the command chair. It dimmed but didn't wink out entirely. It showed the *Klathas* whipping around like a top, to stop facing the *Enterprise* bow-on.

The lights came back on slowly, but with none of the usual crispness of emergency backups snapping in. Groans and mild curses, indicative of pain incurred, formed a slowly rising murmur on the bridge.

Kirk had to pull himself bodily back into his chair. "Mr. Arex, report," he said, wincing and clutching at his right shoulder. "Report on the status of the Klingon vessel. Disposition and speed relative to our own."

There was a long pause. This time not even Arex had escaped the pounding, and it took a few minutes for the Edoan's jarred mind to settle enough so that he could make sense of what his instruments were telling him—those that were still operative.

"Instruments show . . . instruments show . . ." His soulful eyes widened slightly in surprise. "Sir, all engine activity, including impulse power, has ceased aboard the *Klathas*!"

"Mr. Spock, confirmation." *Please*, he added silently.

"Correct, Captain," the first officer reported. "The *Klathas* shows no evidence of internal power beyond what is required to maintain vital life-support systems. She shows no signs of drive activity."

"And what about ourselves?"

Spock studied his instrumentation a moment longer. "We have apparently sustained additional damage as well, Captain. We are in little better shape than the *Klathas*."

"Damage reports starting to come in, Captain," Uhura announced. Her left cheek was swollen and badly discolored, but her voice was as crisp and precise as ever.

"Make note of them, Lieutenant," Kirk responded, "and I'll review them at first opportunity. Meanwhile, get me

Engineering."

Uhura worked her console, then explained, "Sorry, sir . . . that portion of intership communications is presently inoperative. Lieutenant M'ress has checked in to say that she is working on the breakdown with communications personnel and Engineering Maintenance."

"It may be just as well, Jim," McCoy suggested. "I'm not sure I'd care to listen to Scotty just now—not after what that last shock must have done to his half-finished repairs. What *did* happen, anyway?"

"It worked is what happened, Bones, although it worked on both of us—on the *Enterprise* as well as on the *Klathas*." He tried to slip into a comfortable position, discovered that his battered body found no position comfortable, and tried to take his mind off the throb in his shoulder by explaining.

"Did you ever play crack-the-whip when you were a kid, Bones? On any kind of skates?"

"Sure." He grimaced. "I always seemed to end up on the outside end."

"What would happen if that outside end suddenly grabbed hold of something immovable, like a fixed post or other solid object, and held on—even if only for a second?"

McCoy's brows drew together in thought. Then he smiled and nodded slowly. "Of course . . . The shock would be transmitted all the way down the line, to the inner end. If it were done to a line of skating kids, the ones at the other end would be shaken off . . . although everyone would experience the shock to some degree." His eyes suddenly moved to the screen. "So that's what happened to the *Klathas*." He gestured at the now completely immobile alien ship. "It spun them completely around. And I thought *we'd* taken the worst of it."

"Jubilation is pleasant but only temporary, Doctor," Spock suggested unexcitedly, calmly—rationally. He turned his gaze to Kirk. "What do we do now, Captain?"

"Now?" Kirk spread his upturned palms in an age-old gesture. "I'm afraid I didn't have much time to think about that, Mr. Spock. We had to cope somehow, and it seems we have. Do now?" He looked up at the screen.

"We wait to see who can repair his engines or phasers first. Until then, both vessels will continue to drift along exactly as we are—eye to eye, nose to nose—calling each other bad names."

"A most unprofitable apportionment of mental resources, Captain," the first officer observed disapprovingly.

"What was that, Spock?"

"Pay no attention, Jim," McCoy advised him. "Spock's just jealous because Vulcans are culture-conditioned against swearing."

"Word inebriation," Spock countered, slightly miffed. But that was the end of it . . .

IX

"Captain's log, supplemental." Kirk paused, took a long breath, and regarded the *Klathas*. Its position had not changed since Kumara's ploy to break free of the *Enterprise*'s, tractors had been so joltingly countered. It still faced the *Enterprise* nose-on, the lights on its bridge glaring at the starship's scanners.

"We have been drifting below warp-speed together with the *Klathas* for several standard days now. Events have devolved into a race between the engineering complements of both vessels, to see which can be the first to effect repairs to their respective drives and offensive-weapons systems.

"Since phaser instrumentation requires considerably more time and effort, we are concentrating our efforts on repairing the warp-drive, with reasonable assurance that the Klingons are doing the same . . . or so Mr. Spock assures me, based on evidence of detectable activity on board the Imperial cruiser." He paused.

"My only consolation in all of this," he finally concluded, "is the knowledge that Commander Kumara of the *Klathas* is probably more frustrated than I . . ."

He finished the log entry and switched the recorder off, then took the moment of relative quiet to survey the bridge. Spock was engaged in some esoteric research of his own, his instruments set to alert him to any hint of unusual activity on board the Klingon ship. Sulu was replaying a game of trifence on an auxiliary monitor, his own telltales quiet. Uhura was half asleep at her console.

Only Arex appeared alert and absorbed. Come to think of it, the navigator had remained attentive to something for several hours now.

"What do you find so interesting, Mr. Arex?" Kirk asked.

"Hmmm?" The delicate head with its jutting bony ridges turned, limpid eyes gazed back at Kirk. "I have been engrossed in the approach of an impossibility, Captain."

Spock showed that he wasn't all that buried in research by turning to listen curiously. "Elucidate, Lieutenant."

"I have been debating whether to do precisely that, sir," Arex replied. "I wished to be certain of my findings first. It grows more extraordinary as we near. Even so, because of the uncertain situation with regard to the enemy vessel, I have hesitated before mentioning it."

"Before mentioning what, Mr. Arex?" wondered Kirk in puzzlement.

"Captain, my instruments indicate that we are approaching an object of planetary mass. Furthermore—and this is most exciting—it appears to possess free water in oceanic quantities and a breathable atmosphere."

Slowly the rest of the bridge began to stir from somnolence, began to utilize long-inactive instrumentation.

"Spock, the charts for this area—"

"Show it as an empty region, Captain. No stars, most certainly no planets." He bent to his gooseneck viewer, adjusted controls, made demands on exterior scanners and sensors. "Yet I must confirm Mr. Arex's observations." He looked up again, his eyes glowing with the fervor of a scientist who has just made a discovery as spectacular as it was unexpected.

" 'Extraordinary' is an understatement, Captain. It is unique."

"What's unique?" McCoy asked, strolling from the elevator. He had just concluded his tour of all the patients remaining in Sick Bay and satisfied himself as to their condition.

Kirk's voice was hushed with wonder. "We're apparently going to encounter a habitable world, Bones."

McCoy's gaze went to the viewscreen. It still showed only the *Klathas*, floating against a background of thinly sprinkled stars. And since the warp-drive was still out . . .

"A world . . . where, Jim? If we're approaching a sun, the scanners seem to be ignoring it."

"That's just it, Bones. There is no sun. We're going to meet a wanderer."

McCoy was properly startled. "A wanderer? An inhabitable wanderer? I thought such a thing was impossible, Jim."

"So did I, Bones. Any reasonable astronomer will tell you that the odds of encountering a planet which has broken free of its parent sun are . . . well, astronomical. I know of only two such encounters in Federation history, and both are well documented. This is a new discovery.

"But the chances of finding a wandering world with a breathable atmosphere, and free water on the surface . . ."

"Are beyond computation, Captain," Spock concurred. "I would not have believed it possible."

"To spot a non-system object of less than solar mass in free space, Bones, a ship has to be traveling below warp-one, on impulse power or less. No one travels like that . . . unless they've had an accident. Even then, with such incredible odds . . . Bones, this discovery is nearly as important as freeing Delminnen from the Klingons."

"I'm not sure Char Delminnen would agree with you, Jim," McCoy murmured softly.

Days passed. The *Enterprise* and the *Klathas*, locked together in mutual impotence, drifted closer to the wanderer. It grew from a statistic in Arex's computer to a ball, then to a globe, and finally to a massive, real world with continents and oceans and clouds.

Those clouds were the key to its habitability, for they were just thick enough to retain the heat the planet appeared to produce, yet not thick enough to produce a radical, suffocating greenhouse effect.

"According to sensors, the wanderer is about the same size as Earth," Spock was reporting, studying his readouts, "though its gravity is slightly stronger. Both the *Klathas* and the *Enterprise* have already been drawn into orbit around it."

"It's rich in heavy metals and radioactives, too," Kirk mused. "We already know it produces energy. At least we'll have the chance to inspect a unique spatial phenomenon at close range."

"And be carried a little bit farther from the Klingon base at Shahkur Nine while we're inspecting," McCoy pointed out with

satisfaction.

"There's . . . there's something else, Captain," Spock reported. There was an odd note in the first officer's voice that made Kirk turn quickly.

"What is it, Mr. Spock?"

"Incredible as it may seem," he informed the bridge, his expression as close to stunned amazement as it was possible for it to be, "this wanderer appears to be not merely habitable, but inhabited."

Spock's astonishment was instantly transmitted to everyone on the bridge.

"Spock . . . you're certain?" Kirk finally managed to mumble.

"I don't think there is any question of it, Captain. There is too much evidence for it to be denied, despite the uncertainty of high-resolution sensors. Roads, population density . . . all appear present, though in very limited fashion. It suggests a well-populated world, though a technologically impoverished one. Actual surface survey may reveal otherwise, of course."

McCoy was staring at the brilliant, glistening cloud layer against which the *Klathas* was outlined. "What must they be like, Jim, a people who have developed never knowing a sun or a moon—never even knowing the stars? If Spock's assessment of their progress is correct, they can't possibly have telescopes capable of piercing their protective cloud layer."

"I can't imagine a civilization maturing under these conditions, Bones. And yet"—Kirk gestured at the screen—"we're confronted with the actuality. What," he wondered, "should we call it?"

"That's easy, Jim. There's only one name for it—Gypsy."

For a change, Spock and the doctor were in perfect agreement.

Detailed charting of the wanderer began, under the auspices of Spock's science staff. At no time did anyone forget that a battle for survival could erupt with the *Klathas* at any moment, but Kirk could see no reason why nonessential personnel should not take the opportunity to make a thorough study of the wanderer, at least until hostilities resumed.

Undoubledly, the Klingons' science section was occupied by similar activities.

"Final estimates show gravity as one point fourteen Earth normal, atmosphere point ninety-six Earth-Vulcan normal at the surface, temperature in the temperate zones varying between one hundred eighty and two hundred five degrees K."

"Why would it vary?" McCoy asked. "There's no sun to warm any part of the globe more than another."

"The atmosphere is slightly heavier at the planet's equator, thinner at its poles," Spock explained, "although nowhere as extreme climatically as on Earth. There are no ice caps, for example. Other than that," the first officer finished, "this world is a near duplicate of Earth or Vulcan."

"What about light?" McCoy persisted. "How could any civilization develop in the total absence of light?"

"I could make a case for several such civilizations, Doctor, but for this remarkable world it is unnecessary. The dense atmosphere contains an extremely high proportion of ionized gases and natural fluorescents, which are excited by the abundance of radioactives in the surface. If anything, these people must be afflicted with perpetual illumination, and not darkness."

"I see." McCoy nodded. "They live under the grand-daddy of all auroras."

"As to what the inhabitants are like, Doctor," Spock continued, "there is evidence—evidence which can be confirmed only by on-surface inspection—that they are at least roughly humanoid in appearance and build. We've sent down a few drone probes for close-in study. Superficially, at least, the resemblance to the normal Vulcan-human pattern is astounding."

"Absolutely no chance of their being advanced enough to help in repairing the *Enterprise*, or in countering the Klingons?" a hopeful Kirk queried.

"I'm afraid not, Captain," Spock replied drily. "First impressions have only just been confirmed by the probes. There are no centers of population larger than a good-sized town. Settlement appears to be primarily rural, with even

villages isolated and scattered. I would say they are in the process of emerging from a medieval era into one of primitive middle-class capitalism. I'd place their level of technology no higher than fifteenth-century Earth or fifth-epoch Vulcan."

"Then we're not likely to encounter warp-drive technicians awaiting our call for assistance," Kirk observed. "Even so, the fact that they've achieved any kind of civilization at all—the very fact of their existence—is incredible. What a pity that we're too busy fighting the Klingons to remain to study them."

Spock agreed sadly. "Most unfortunate, Captain. We can plot this world's position and a probable trajectory for it, but it will still be extremely difficult to locate again."

"Excuse me, Captain." Kirk turned his attention to Uhura. "We're being beamed from the *Klathas*."

"They've got their communications working again, then. Put it on the screen, Lieutenant."

Surprisingly, Kirk found he felt no particular animosity toward the figure who appeared. There were signs of strain on the man's face: indications of fatigue induced by too much worry and too little sleep.

Kirk wondered if he looked as bad.

"Good day to you, James Kirk," Kumara began pleasantly. "I trust you are feeling well?"

"I'm getting by, Kumara. Yourself?"

The Klingon commander frowned, appeared petulant. "I've been rather restless lately, I'm afraid. For one thing, I am still rearranging my quarters. That little trick of yours in cutting your tractors and then reestablishing contact after we had changed our course drastically realigned that section of the *Klathas*."

"Sorry to hear it," Kirk replied, in a tone which indicated he wasn't sorry at all. "I'll bet that's not the only thing that's had to be rearranged." For some reason, Kirk found this falsely jovial atmosphere quite irritating. Maybe it was the memory of the faces he had seen in Sick Bay these past days.

"All right, Kumara, you didn't break battle silence for the first time in days to apprise me of the state of your bedroom. What do you want?"

Kumara's outward demeanor wasn't shaken. He remained unruffled. "You are quite correct, Jim. You see, a new development has caused me to reconsider our position.

"I have only just discovered that the man Delminnen is utterly incapable of building, designing, or instructing my technicians in how to duplicate his awesome device. It appears only his female sibling can do that."

"You damned torturer!" McCoy exploded. "How did you pry that out of him, Kumara? I know the Klingons are noted for their inventiveness with—"

Kumara waved him to silence. "Please, ah,"—he peered harder at his own screen—"Doctor, I believe. Am I a barbarian, to resort to the primitive physical intimidation of helpless prisoners? Besides, I would not risk losing forever the knowledge held in the human Delminnen's mind.

"No, to be quite truthful, the human bragged about it all over the *Klathas* as soon as he became convinced his sibling was not on board. It was hardly necessary to pry anything out of him." The Klingon commander's expression twisted. "Needless to say, I viewed his revelation with considerable dismay."

Kirk was growing impatient. "All this unnatural courtesy and politeness must be upsetting your liver, Kumara. Why did you beam me? What is it you want?"

Kumara looked back at Kirk with exaggerated surprise. "Why, the same thing you do, Jim. An end to all this suspense and a final disposition of our . . . um . . . mutual interests."

"We'll settle that as soon as my chief engineer informs me our drive is repaired—which should be any minute now."

"Perhaps," Kumara admitted, smiling easily. "Then again, it may be some time yet before the damage to either of our ships is rectified. I have thought of another way."

"Careful, Jim," McCoy whispered.

"What *other* way, Kumara?"

"I propose a contest."

"A contest?" Kirk echoed warily. "What kind of contest?"

"One that is simple and effective." Kumara leaned forward. "It should appeal to you, Jim."

"Go on."

"It's simple, really. You wish the man Delminnen returned to you. I need his sibling. Separately, they are useless to both of us."

"I disagree," countered Kirk. "They're both still alive . . . something they probably wouldn't be if you had both of them for very long."

"You question my morality, too, but never mind," Kumara continued. "Here is what I propose. I am sure you have been studying the extraordinary world below us intensively these past days. Each of us will assume the attire of the inhabitants. We will take one officer with us from our respective crews. You will also take the girl with you, while I shall bring the man.

"We will take nothing but these clothes, our communicators, and some local means of exchange, and we will beam down to the planet. There are methods of insuring that each side descends with the correct number of people, the right people, and nothing in the way of modern weapons. Neither side can attempt to unexpectedly beam the other aboard his ship, since we will both have transporters locked on us at all times. And you will recall what interlocking transporter fields did the *last* time."

"Jim, he's crazy," McCoy whispered anxiously. "You can't possibly be thinking of—"

"Go on, Kumara," Kirk said slowly.

"Each group of three will beam down at opposite ends of the largest town on the main continent, the one bordering the central sea where the two rivers meet. We will then allow ourselves three time periods under the local conditions to . . . ah . . . effect a determination of our conflict, one way or the other. If at the conclusion of that period a solution has not been achieved, each party will beam back up to its ship and we will try something else.

"Even if my group proves successful, it may still be that your ship will regain its drive and weapons capabilities first. Then my success will have been for naught. Naturally the reverse may occur. So in any case this may not necessarily be the resolution of our situation.

"What do you think?"

McCoy was stunned, for it seemed that Kirk was actually seriously considering the Klingon's proposal. "Jim, you're not thinking of going along with this madness, are you? Don't you see what he's up to? It's you he's worried about, not the *Enterprise*. He's thought up this entire bizarre scheme as a way of eliminating *you*."

"Quiet, Bones" was all Kirk said. To Kumara he explained, "I agree that we can insure through various means that no advanced weapons are transported down, that the number of personnel is limited to a single assisting officer, and so on. But even the best of such guarantees can be circumvented. I want something more."

Kumara looked like a man forced to play his last ace instead of holding it in reserve. "Very well." He rose from his command chair and lifted both arms in a peculiar salute that was half military, half religious in origin.

"I swear as commander of a warship of the Imperial Fleet, as a Klingon lord, by the sacred warrior's soul of his Imperial Majesty Emperor Karhammur the Fortieth, and by the God of Gods, Great Kinkuthanza, to abide by the terms of the contest I have just set before us and before witnesses."

He lowered his arms and resumed his seat. "Furthermore, I agree to exchange ships' *nadas*. They will be able to oversee the actual transporting of each group to the surface, besides acting as hostages."

Kirk considered, ignoring McCoy's silent entreaties. The stalemate was unnerving. Should the Klingons finish their repairs first, he would be at a decided disadvantage. He looked across at Spock and saw his first officer waiting patiently.

"What's your opinion, Mr. Spock?"

"I am not qualified to offer an opinion where a superior officer's life is at stake, Captain. However, I believe the commander's suggestion could be turned to our advantage."

Kirk nodded. "My thoughts exactly, Spock."

McCoy looked angrily over at the first officer. "You're crazy too, Spock! What makes you think a Klingon's going to adhere to any kind of rules?"

"Two things, Bones. First of all, Spock, can you recall any instance of a Klingon officer's breaking an oath sworn on the Emperor's soul and on Kinkuthanza?"

"Never, Captain. To do so would be the equivalent of murdering one's honor, and the honor of one's line back to the first generation. It is one of the few things I can think of which would be binding on a Klingon."

"Kumara," Kirk said curtly, turning back to the screen, "I accept your proposal."

"Excellent! I will beam down with one assisting officer to the eastern end of the town, the sector known to the inhabitants as 'Gray Shadow,' in one hour, your time, from the cessation of this conversation. You were always first in classes at the FEA in Adaptive Ecology, Jim. You will be a challenge. Rest assured the human Delminnen will be with me." His arms came up and crossed again in that peculiar fashion.

"Good hunting, Jim."

The screen blanked. "Transmission ended, Captain," Uhura reported.

Kirk activated the intercom. "Alien Ecology and Sociology, attention. This is the captain speaking. I will require in forty minutes suitable attire for myself, Science Lieutenant Bresica Celli, and Ms Char Delminnen for a stay on the surface of Gypsy. Nothing fancy—you should aim for clothing appropriate for members of the lower noble classes. Also an ample supply of the local medium of exchange. Simulations must be accurate enough to fool the locals."

As he broke off and rose from the chair, McCoy stepped between Kirk and the elevator. "You're not going through with this, Jim. There are more sensible ways to get yourself killed!"

"What makes you think I'm the one who's going to get killed, Bones? I'm afraid I've got to take the risk. Kumara's gambling too. This may be our only chance to rescue Van Delminnen. If we finish engine and weapons repairs first, you know they're going to kill him rather than risk the Federation's obtaining the device. But if we conclude our repairs first *and* have both Delminnens safely on board . . . no, I can't pass up that chance."

McCoy looked desperately over at the science station. "Spock, you reason with him!"

Spock left his position and confronted Kirk, who looked back at him in surprise. "I fear the doctor is correct, Captain. I must object. As it stands now, this scheme is inadvisable, highly dangerous, and illogical."

"There, you see?" McCoy looked satisfied.

"What's the matter, Spock?" a puzzled Kirk wondered. "A moment ago you declared the contest could be to our advantage. What's made you change your mind?"

"He's seen reason, that's all, Jim."

Spock's brows arched as he glanced at McCoy. "I always see reason, Doctor." Spock turned to face Kirk. "It is your present choice of personnel, Captain, which prompts my objection."

Kirk frowned. The frown turned into a grin, and he walked back to the command chair and activated the intercom. "Sciences? Inform Lieutenant Celli his services will not be required on this expedition. The second set of native clothing should conform to the uniform specifications of First Officer Spock." He cut off and smiled back over his shoulder.

"Mr. Spock?"

Not a sign of a smile cracked that stolid visage, not a hint of a chuckle modulated the reply, but Kirk sensed both nonetheless.

"I withdraw my objection, Captain. Subsequent modifications now indicate that participation in the contest is logical."

"Spock!"

The first officer turned a reproving gaze on McCoy. "As the captain is determined to go, Doctor, it is only sensible that the best-qualified support accompany him. I am the best-qualified support. Therefore, I am going too. Really, you complicate things unnecessarily."

Spock brushed by a dazed McCoy, following Kirk into the elevator.

Alien Sociology was in constant communication with the engineers in Nonmetallic Fabrication, with the result that Kirk

had hardly entered his cabin when, a specialist, laden with an armload of clothing, buzzed for admittance.

Kirk accepted the bundle, dismissed the man, and set about examining all the camouflage he would have on the strange world below. Sciences had assured him that, with a few minor changes, he, Spock, and Char Delminnen would be indistinguishable from the "Gypsies" they would soon move among.

The clothes were unremarkable, that being remarkable in itself. To look closely at them one would have guessed that they had been produced on a primitive hand loom instead of in the bowels of a matrix synthesizer. Kirk tried on the boots, the simple long pants and loose upper garment, the fur vest, and he finished by closely inspecting the carefully "aged" necklace with its concealed universal translator. The matching earpiece would appear to an uncertain observer as nothing more than a minor deformity—nothing sufficient to arouse anyone's interest.

Local currency was concealed in a sort of pouch-belt and consisted of a collection of small, heavy metal squares. Fortunately, the native coins were dull and poorly stamped. There were limits even to the *Enterprise*'s ultra-high-powered sensors.

Another buzz sounded insistently at the door.

"Come," Kirk said, for the door's benefit as much as that of his visitor. Responding to his verbal command, the single wedge slid aside.

Kirk examined himself in his mirror and turned to greet McCoy. "Well, Bones, do I look like a native?"

"You look like a fool," McCoy shot back tautly, "which I suppose is appropriate, since you're going on a fool's errand."

Kirk didn't reply, but waited for the doctor to finish.

"You don't mean to go through with this, Jim. This isn't a game being played with plastic pieces on some rec-room board. Kumara wants only two things out of this—Char Delminnen alive and you dead." He looked across at his friend, expression and voice straining for comprehension. "How can you possibly trust that—that—his very concepts of right and wrong are alien to ours!"

"Bones," Kirk began softly, "I knew Kumara when both of us were green, unspaced cadets. I know that was a long time ago, but from what I've seen these past days, he hasn't changed, and I don't think I have. He might steal you blind at the first opportunity, stab you in the back if he thought he could get away with it, lie, cheat—anything for an advantage."

McCoy was nodding knowingly. "Sounds like a Klingon gentleman all right."

"But he won't go back on that oath. He'll abide because he set the guidelines, Bones, not me. Yes, he'd do all those other things, given the chance, but he won't go back on that oath. And you're right—that *is* alien to us." Carefully he smoothed the pouch-belt around his waist, so that no tempting bulges would show.

"Besides, there's no way he could go back on his word after we've exchanged *nadas*."

McCoy momentarily forgot his anger in puzzlement. "Exchange *nadas*? Didn't that have something to do with the hostage exchange you two were talking about?"

"That's right," confirmed the captain. "Another alien tradition, and another of the very few agreements binding on a Klingon. I hope you'll be comfortable during your visit to the *Klathas*, Bones."

It took much less than a minute for McCoy to digest the import of that statement. "*Me?* I'm going to the *Klathas*? But why me, Jim?"

"Because you're our resident servant and high priest of *Nada*, the Klingon god-patron of medicine. There have been reports of Klingons entering a hospital on board ship or on-planet and massacring the patients . . . but they have never touched a physician. It's part of their warrior-tainted cultural pattern. Your status on the *Klathas* will be that of a saint, Bones."

"Saint to a bunch of Klingons—I can't think of a less welcome honor."

"You'd better be grateful for it. It guarantees your immunity . . . and for that reason you're the only one I can trust the Klingons *not* to massacre if the contest goes against them.

Naturally, while you're on board the *Klathas*, your Klingon counterpart will be here on the *Enterprise*."

"But it's all unnecessary, Jim," McCoy objected one last time. "Kumara's set the whole thing up. He's called the rules, the place, everything. And another thing . . . How can you risk something as potentially dangerous as the Delminnen device on a two-man expedition?"

Kirk sighed. "I told you, Bones, it's our best chance for rescuing Van Delminnen." He started for the door.

McCoy put a restraining hand on his shoulder, still angry and still unconvinced. When he spoke again, his tone was low and almost accusing.

"Blast it, Jim, are you sure you're going through with this because you believe that—or because you're as vain about your ability to outmaneuver Kumara on a strange world as he thinks you are?"

Kirk glared at the doctor, and for a long moment what passed between them was as eloquent as it was unspoken. Finally: "You think Kumara's appealing to my vanity, then?"

"Is he, Jim?"

"I . . . I don't know. Maybe he is, Bones. Maybe he has already outmaneuvered me before the game's even started. But I do know this . . ." His voice rose.

"Besides keeping the weapon from the Klingons, there's also Char Delminnen to think of. It's our duty to save her brother, because he's a Federation citizen, because he's a human being. If I pass up a chance to do that to protect my own neck, Bones, then my commission's worthless.

"In addition, I'm going crazy waiting around while our engineering section races theirs to see who can fix their engines first. Don't you think Kumara's nervous? He's so nervous, *he's* the one who's proposed something to resolve part of our problem, given us the chance to do something besides sit around and wait for our fingernails to dissolve in our mouths.

"By all that's worth salvaging in this bizarre galaxy, Bones, I'm going to make the most of that opportunity."

Neither man moved until McCoy seemed to slump in on himself a little. He looked away. "All right. If I can't talk you

out of it, at least I can accompany you to the transporter room."

"Sure you don't want to take anything with you, Bones," Kirk wondered, "to make your visit on the *Klathas* more bearable?"

"The only thing that could do that would be a Class Four phaser," the doctor grunted, "suitable for performing large-scale surgery on massed Klingon bodies. Let's go . . ."

X

"Captain's log, supplemental," Kirk recited, addressing the wall intercom in the Transporter Room. It was keyed by verbal command to the ship's log.

"Char Delminnen, Mr. Spock, and myself are preparing to beam down to the wandering world we have named Gypsy to commence a contest with our Klingon counterparts. We hope this contest will favorably resolve the stalemate in which we presently find ourselves with regard to her brother and the Imperial cruiser *Klathas*.

"In consequence of this, an exchange of ships' chief physicians has been effected, thus forcing a solemn bind upon the Klingons not to deviate from the rules set down for the competition . . . with appropriate sensors and scanners also monitoring the terms of the contest.

"Doctor McCoy is now aboard the *Klathas*, and his Klingon doppelganger, Surgeon-in-Battle Kattrun dek Prenn, has arrived aboard the *Enterprise*." He paused for a second, finally adding, "I only hope that my evaluation of the incipient action turns out to be more accurate than Dr. McCoy's."

The entry ended, Kirk turned and walked past the transporter console to join a waiting Spock and Char Delminnen in the activated alcove. Briefly he noted the disposition of their native garb, the quality and detail of their facial makeup, and found everything satisfactory, if not visually pleasing.

"Ready, Mr. Spock?"

"Quite ready, Captain." He rubbed at the thick cap pulled low on his head. "Though this wig and attendant headgear are more than a little irritating."

"You'll get used to them, Spock. They're necessary—our Gypsies don't have acute hearing organs."

"An unfortunate evolutionary defect," the first officer commented drily.

Kirk smiled, then turned a more solemn, appraising gaze on the stiff figure at his right. "And you, Ms. Delminnen, are you sure you want to go through with this? Our success hinges on you, you know. I can't order you to participate."

Her reply was impatient. "I've already consented to it, Captain, as has my brother. The sooner we stop brooding about possible consequences and get on with it, the sooner Van and I will be reunited. Isn't that right?"

"That is very right." Convinced that the slight, hyper-tense woman would be an asset rather than a burden, Kirk turned to face back into the room. After a quick check of the chronometer disguised as a ring, he said pleasantly, "Energize when ready, Mr. Scott."

"Aye, Captain."

The chief engineer adjusted the necessary instrumentation, and in a moment the ship's population decreased by three. At the same time, two beings of differing temperament and physical makeup lay in unfamiliar surroundings and began counting the minutes. There were a great many to pass until the end of three days, and none could say whether Dr. Leonard McCoy or SIB Kattrun dek Prenn counted harder . . .

A good deal of planning and examination of long-range sensor reports had gone into determining exactly where the party from the *Enterprise* should set down. Ideally, the place should offer temporary concealment without being too isolated, and without immediately exposing the strangers to the new world —or the new world to the strangers—before either had a chance to be acclimated.

So the three ministers in mufti materialized in the middle of a deserted alleyway. Faint people noises could be heard nearby, just loud enough for all three to properly adjust their necklace translators.

Even more than the damp alleyway with its claustrophobic high stone walls, even more than the always mind-tingling sound of a new tongue, Kirk was drawn to the sky overhead. The light was dimmer than was usual on Earth, but more spectacular than the meteorologists had predicted.

No one color dominated a sky that was aflame with auroral blaze: Reds, greens, blues and golds and violent purple shifted and writhed in an atmosphere of perpetual excitation. Whenever a particularly brilliant display occurred, they would acquire a new phenomenon—a shadow. And the shadows changed constantly, according to the varying intensity of the sky. To look at one's own shadow was to be subject to a stroboscopic display of peculiarly personal dimensions.

A final check insured that no one had observed their unorthodox method of arrival. "Everyone all right?" Kirk whispered. His words sounded strange and tickled his brain, voiced as they were through the translator in the local tongue and then retranslated back through the tiny device implanted in his left ear.

"Quite, Captain . . ." "Yes, Captain . . ." came the replies.

"Okay, our first step is to obtain some local weapons. I don't expect Kumara to waste any time in local sight-seeing, so we'd better not either." He turned to face the open end of the alley. "If Scotty dropped us where the cartographers indicated he should, we ought to be next to a fair-sized marketplace."

The group moved cautiously down the alleyway and out into a strange new world of noise and movement and color. The alley fronted on an extensive bazaar. One old woman saw them emerge from the alley. If she found it extraordinary, she chose not to publicize the discovery. Kirk already suspected from the sociologists' preliminary reports that this was a world where one minded one's own business.

They began to stroll down the long lanes between stalls. The bazaar was a weird combination of old Earth Arabian and medieval Edoan.

One thing that was never in doubt from the moment they appeared was the efficacy of their disguises. They were immediately besieged by hawkers and vendors offering wares and goods and services as colorful as they were enigmatic. There were many offered which even Spock could make no sense of, and others which seemed to conflict with laws natural and otherwise.

Their objectives now were too practical to be disguised by alien rhetoric, however. Kirk adopted what he hoped was just

the right degree of imperious indifference, ignoring bargains and luxuries alike.

"Something about this all strikes me as very strange, Captain," Spock commented, his gaze moving from one stall to the next.

"That's hardly surprising, Mr. Spock," replied Kirk, fending off a proffered armload of aromatic meat. "This whole world is very strange, from its very existence on down."

"Captain Kirk." He turned his attention to the booth Char Delminnen was pointing at.

It was a tightly sealed, smallish shop, its narrow tables replete with lethal-looking medieval-style weaponry, some faintly familiar, some less so. None was beyond utilization by the new arrivals. There are only so many ways to change the appearance of metal designed to penetrate another person without impairing its efficiency.

Hands clasped over a well-cultivated paunch, the proprietor stood staring pensively at the entrance to his stall.

Kirk said, "Excuse me, we need to buy some weapons." The translator, bearing in mind Kirk's assumed social station on this world, translated it as:

"Bestir thyself, o lazy one! We would purchase arms from your pitiful stock."

The stall owner started and nearly fell over his own legs in his haste to get to his feet. His eyes glittered nearly as much as the false jewels in Kirk's necklace.

"Ten thousand genuflections, noble sir! The gods' blessings on you and your offspring, may they be many. You desire weapons? Rest content you have come to the finest armory in the city. My most magnificent steels and swords, knives and daggers, are unmatched—and available especially to you, my lords and lady, at prices so modest as to make one blush the color of her cheeks. Were you to search a thousand years through a hundred—"

"Enough, grandfather of loquacity! You have convinced us," Kirk declared, the translator once again having embellished his simple reply. He made a pretense of inspecting the stock. "We shall require two swords of your best metal and temper—sabers, not rapiers. And two dirks, short and tough enough to

penetrate leather without turning." He hesitated. "And your most delicately honed stiletto for the lady."

Char Delminnen eyed him with satisfaction.

The owner was bowing and abasing himself to the point of embarrassing both Kirk and Spock, though it was more to conceal the mercenary gleam in his eyes than to honor his customers.

"At once, noble lords! You shall have the finest only. I do not keep the very best here exposed to the sky, and to thieves. Pray grant me a moment." Still bowing obsequiously, he backed into the depths of the stall.

Spock's attention had remained focused on the constantly moving, surrounding crowd. The first officer had been quite content to leave the purchasing to Kirk, who now turned to him, whispering.

"Any sign of Kumara or anyone who might be his accompanying officer?"

Spock shook his head. "If they are in our immediate vicinity, Captain, they are too well disguised for me to discover. I think we are still reasonably safe. Even at a fast run, it is still a fair distance to the other side of this town."

They separated as the owner, puffing heavily, appeared with the five weapons.

"As you requested, lords," he beamed, setting them out carefully on red velvet. "The apex of my humble craft. Notice the color in the metal, the superb honing!" He rambled on as Kirk and Spock hefted the swords, removing them from their matching scabbards. They made a few practice passes at each other with them, keeping the movements simple. Modern fencing might very well be an eye-catching anomaly here, and one thing they didn't desire was suspicious attention from the locals.

"I suppose they'll do," Kirk agreed, the words coming out in a bored and slightly petulant tone. He slid his saber into the scabbard, which attached easily to his pouch-belt. The thick, triangular dirks went through a belt loop on the opposite side from the sword. Char Delminnen found a secretive place for the narrow stiletto.

"I know you will be pleased, noble lords." His eyes narrowed and he leaned forward, lowering his voice. "It is plain you are not of Ghuncha Town, and are strangers here. Might I make so bold as to inquire—"

"As to the cost, which can be excessive for those who are too curious," Spock interrupted. His brows rose slightly at the way the translator interpreted his prosaic sentence.

"Certainly, yes," the proprietor babbled hastily. "I did not mean to pry, I did not . . . fifty *pahds*, noble sirs, will be more than sufficient."

"Since it is more than sufficient, it is doubtless more than we should pay," Kirk rumbled, reaching into the lining of his pouch-belt. "However, I have no time to haggle." He brought out a handful of brown metal squares. The shopkeeper's eyes nearly joined an unsold sword on the red velvet as Kirk counted out five of the largest squares and handed them to the man.

"Thank you, noble lords . . . blessings forever upon you," he called as they turned and began walking away. "Blessings a thousand times!"

"I'd trade a thousand blessings for a place to rest, Captain Kirk," Delminnen ventured many hours later. "Isn't it time to stop? There's no real night here, so we'll have to decide on our own."

"Innkeeping must be a round-the-clock business on Gypsy, Captain," Spock added. "We should have no difficulty in locating a busy one. Ms. Delminnen is correct. We must pace ourselves carefully or risk exhaustion at a crucial moment. The slightly greater gravity here does tend to weary one rapidly. I could use a meal myself."

"All right," Kirk agreed, wiping his forehead. The strain of trying to locate a Klingon under every curious face was beginning to tire him also. "It would be a good idea to establish some kind of local base of operations while we still have time for such things. Any sign of a likely prospect, Mr. Spock?"

The first officer was standing on tiptoe, staring ahead and slightly to their left. "I have already addressed myself to the

problem, Captain. There appears to be an inn of some sort directly ahead of us."

A short walk brought them to the front of the establishment. They couldn't read the lettering on its front, but a quick, unobtrusive survey of the structure's exterior and the clientele carefully moving in and out through the oddly hinged multiple swinging—or was it folding—doors seemed to confirm Spock's initial appraisal. Furthermore, the appearance of those entering and leaving suggested a moderately high-class business.

That was enough for Kirk. They would have enough trouble remaining incognito without inviting conflict with the less savory elements of the native population. After watching the operation of the strange doors long enough to insure they wouldn't get pinched by them, he led Spock and Delminnen inside.

A system of mirrors and high windows admitted plenty of light. The interior wasn't much dimmer than the alley they had materialized in. To their left was a series of low tables at which some natives, mostly male, reclined while drinking and eating. To the right was a circular desk.

Between the two a long, paved walkway ran slightly above floor level until it met a branching stairway at the far end of the big room. This led up to a series of interior balconies before terminating in a large skylight three stories up.

A few patrons looked up, casually inspected the newcomers, and returned to their meals. Kirk noted the relative cleanliness of the place with satisfaction and moved to address the single opening in the high circular desk.

There was no one behind it. A small gong hung under a curved support to one side. Kirk lifted the tiny metal stick and hit the gong once, twice.

A tall, aged, cadaverous native appeared from an unsuspected doorway at the back of the concealed area. He wore an interesting arrangement of bloomers and overlapping vests, together with what would pass on Earth for a mournful expression. He looked more like a mortician than a concierge . . . a fact which led Kirk to wonder about the perhaps deceptive peacefulness of the inn.

Nevertheless, they were here, and it was unlikely they would encounter any place better.

"What," the native asked tiredly, "do my lords require?"

"Food and lodging for this night and maybe several more. Your best room, on the second floor, one entrance only."

The native glanced at Char Delminnen, then back at Kirk. "One room, my lord, for the three of you?"

The translator turned Kirk's mild impatience into anger. "Yes, *one* room! Are you deaf—or do you wish to be? There must be sufficient individual bedding for all. You will see to it personally that suitable arrangements are made."

Either this native was made of stronger stuff than the weapons seller or he simply didn't care. "Whatever my lords require. I shall see to it."

Kirk turned as if to leave, then hesitated. "There is one more thing, innkeeper."

"My lord?"

"Have you yourself seen, or heard tell of, two men . . . strangers like ourselves, with strong jaws and exceptional arrogance? They have a slightly foppish, tremendously arrogant younger man with them?" Kirk noticed Char Delminnen bridle at that description of her brother, but, if anything, the translators would only enlarge on his characterization of Van Delminnen's natural obstinacy.

The innkeeper paused thoughtfully. " 'Arrogance' is a strange word to use in identifying a man, my lord. I am sorry, but I am not in any way familiar with the persons you describe."

"I see," replied a disappointed Kirk. "Should you hear tell of such a group, inform us at once." He jiggled his pouch-belt significantly, so that the native could hear the clink of currency within.

The innkeeper merely bowed politely. "I shall do so, my lords." He gestured at the double stairway at the far end of the room. "Stairway on your right, second floor, third door down." A peculiarly shaped key was handed over. "Rest well. The room is already prepared as you desire."

Kirk frowned momentarily but then, why shouldn't such a room be readily available? He took the key, and they started for the stairs.

It was fortunate that the native's directions had been so explicit, since the carved squiggles on each door meant nothing to any of them. Kirk tried the door and found it unlocked, and they entered.

The room was spacious but dim, despite the large window. Spock moved to inspect it. He noted with a mutter of gratification that it was a sheer drop to the street below, and that the building facing them had no window directly opposite. They would have nothing to worry about from that quarter.

From there he moved to the door. Fishing into his own pouch-belt, he produced a tiny, simple lock. It looked like a local native handicraft, but was far stronger and more subtle than any lock on this world. He began to install it on the door.

"Spock and I are going to make one last sweep of our immediate area," Kirk was explaining to the exhausted Char Delminnen, "to make certain Kumara and your brother aren't close at hand. You may as well get some rest in the meantime." He nodded toward the door. "The lock Mr. Spock is installing is coded to respond only to our three voices."

"I'd like to go with you, Captain, but . . . I *am* tired. All right, I'll wait for you here. Wake me when you return. Then I can keep a watch while you and Mr. Spock take some rest."

"Sounds good, Ms. Delminnen. We'll try not to be too long." He reached out to pat her reassuringly on the shoulder—and froze as she leaned forward, up . . . and kissed him.

"Ready, Captain?" a blank-faced Spock asked from the half-open doorway.

Kirk gazed back at her uncertainly, finding her expression more unreadable than that of any other woman he'd ever seen. Whether there was affection, or curiosity, or something utterly incomprehensible in her stare he couldn't say.

"Coming, Mr. Spock."

The incident wasn't mentioned, and Spock gave every indication of having consigned it to the part of his mind reserved for filing inexplicable human actions. Kirk knew

Spock had forgotten nothing, but he was grateful for his first officer's efforts to give the appearance of having done so.

Gradually it slipped from his mind too as they moved about the shops and homes and stalls, questioning the natives with increasing ease and the assurance that, while they were undeniably strangers, no one suspected how strange they actually were.

The questioning process became an exercise in consistent futility. No matter how detailed, how graphic, they made their descriptions of Kumara and Van Delminnen, they were greeted with the same negative response.

"No, noble lords, I have seen no one fitting such a description . . ." "Pardon, noble sirs, never have we heard tell of men with eyes such as you claim . . ." "No, I have not heard of them, or set sight of them myself . . ." "I have not . . ." "No . . ." "Not I . . ." "Never . . ."

By the time they returned to the inn, Kirk was too tired to care if Kumara was in this section of the town, or still at the opposite end, or back on the *Klathas*.

"I'd feel a lot better," he told Spock as they started up the stone stairway, "if I knew Kumara's intentions. That's more important than his location."

A scream sounded from upstairs. It was slightly muffled, but still audible enough for both men to know instantly it did not come from a native throat.

"I believe we are about to obtain a partial answer to both questions, Captain."

The transporter could have gotten them upstairs faster—but not much faster. Kirk had a hand out, reaching for the door handle, when it opened from within. He found himself face to face with a short, stocky native. This individual, whose countenance screamed "thug," had one arm wrapped tightly around a weakly struggling Char Delminnen.

They stared at each other in momentary paralysis. The native saw Spock standing behind Kirk, computed the odds, and let go of Delminnen. Turning, he made a run for the open window as fast as his bandy, muscular legs could carry him.

Kirk brushed past the dazed Delminnen and tackled the native just before he could reach the rope dangling outside

the window. Both men crashed to the floor, and Kirk discovered that he was grappling with a python. Gravity-stressed muscles shoved him onto his back, and he saw the glint of light on metal as the native raised the knife.

A hand came down on the native's shoulder, fingers moved quickly and skillfully, and the native collapsed. Panting heavily from the exertion under the strong gravity, Kirk slid out from under the unconscious form and climbed to his feet. Another figure drew him over to the far bed.

Char Delminnen was sitting there, shivering noticeably but otherwise apparently in control of herself. Kirk moved to touch her, hesitated, and drew back.

"He came in through the window?"

She nodded weakly.

"The rope is suspended from the roof, Captain," Spock reported. Holding on to the sill with one hand, he was leaning out over the street and peering upward. Now he came back inside and closed the window behind him. "I apologize, Ms. Delminnen. I was negligent in my analysis of this room's defensive potential. At the time it did not occur to me that one could as easily come down to this room as up to it. Curious oversight."

"Forget it, Spock," ordered Kirk. "I didn't think of it either. We're not used to acting like cat-burglars."

" 'Cat-burglars,' Captain? The reference—"

"Has nothing to do with stealing cats," Kirk hastened to explain. That brought a hesitant grin from Char Delminnen. She stopped shaking and gestured.

"I think my visitor is coming around, Captain."

Indeed, the native was emitting bubbling sounds indicative of rising consciousness. Spock helped him to his feet and steadied the man's staggers with one hand on his shoulder and the other holding an arm tightly behind his back.

The native looked fearfully from Char Delminnen to Kirk. He tried to break free . . . but only once. Then his gaze dropped to the wooden floor, and he muttered sullenly, "What will you do to me . . . noble lords." The last was uttered in a fashion clearly indicating that their nobility was in considerable question.

"Nothing . . . if you answer a few questions," Kirk told him honestly. "Who sent you to kidnap the woman?"

The native remained silent. Spock moved his fingers on the man's shoulder in a certain way, and the man winced.

"Was it a tall man," Kirk continued evenly, "with very small pupils and dry-looking skin? Who moved quickly and with sharp gestures?"

The native's face twisted bizarrely as Spock applied further pressure. Finally: "Yes, yes . . . now let me go, sirs!" As Spock's hand relaxed, so did the native's expression. "I'll tell you what you wish."

The first officer let go and took a couple of quick steps back, remaining between the native and the now closed window. Sighing in a very humanlike fashion, the native rubbed his neck and shook his freed arm to get the blood (or whatever served for bodily fluid here) moving again.

"Where did you meet this man?" Kirk continued.

"At the Inn of the Six Rains. He offered me three hundred *pahds* if I would bring him a woman he described to me." The native indicated the attentive Delminnen. "That woman."

"Was he alone?"

"No." The native looked thoughtful. "There were two other lords with him. One was very much like the first, but the third was different. He was smaller and quiet . . . in fact, he said nothing while I was present. "

"Under orders from Kumara, no doubt, Captain," commented Spock.

"This other lord," Char Delminnen broke in, "who did not speak. Did he look well to you?"

The native eyed her curiously. "As well as the others . . . though I confess I paid little notice to him. It was the largest of the three lords I was concerned with."

"The one who offered you the money," Kirk declared pointedly. "This lord—he told you where to find the woman?"

"No."

Kirk relaxed considerably at that. That meant Kumara was probably not waiting for them downstairs, or rigging the stairway or preparing similar deviltry nearby.

"I found her myself, from the information the lord gave to me . . . gave to all of us."

"All of you?" Spock echoed. "There are more than one?"

"Aye. There were many present to hear the lord's offer."

"Why are you telling us this?"

The native made an indecipherable gesture. "Why should I help some other *cajjy* get rich?"

"It sounds like the sort of thing Kumara would do," mused Kirk sardonically. "Find himself a nice, peaceful room in a comfortable inn near his beam-down point, and then hire half the small-time cutthroats in town to do his dirty work for him, so he doesn't have to risk his own precious skin. Kumara's an atypical Klingon, Spock, but he's still a Klingon."

"I had not intended to dispute that, Captain," the first officer essayed easily. "I do wish to point out a significant new fact, however."

"What? What new fact, Spock?"

"Captain, we now have a distinct advantage. Kumara is ignorant as to our whereabouts, but we now know where he is based."

They exchanged glances. While they do so, the native showed that his body was more alert than his expression. He darted around a not-quite-fast-enough Spock, dove for the rope through the closed window, and missed.

All three rushed to the window. No crowd gathered below to inspect the body. On the contrary, there was a distinct absence of curiosity on the part of the populace.

"One native dead . . . one too many." Kirk looked over at his friend and second-in-command. "I think it's time we paid a visit to the Inn of the Six Rains, Mr. Spock."

"I agree, Captain."

They turned to leave. Char Delminnen was waiting by the door. She eyed Kirk expectantly.

"I can't leave you here and risk having another of Kumara's hired thugs finding you. Do you think you're up to coming with us, or should we hunt for another inn and wait a while longer?"

By way of answering she showed the stiletto, which her attacker had given her no opportunity to use, then slipped it back inside her blouse.

"Let's find my brother, Captain Kirk."

This time, she gave *his* shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

For a worried moment, Kirk was concerned that they might get no closer to the Inn of the Six Rains than the front door of their own inn. The dour manager was waiting for them by his enclosed moat of a desk, with two towering locals. The newcomers wore identical clothing. Kirk didn't think it was because they were relatives; he had been on enough worlds to recognize a uniform when he saw one.

"Captain," Spock whispered as the innkeeper gestured to them, "we could use the rope outside our room, ascend to the roof . . ."

"Easy, Spock. Surely other residents heard the scream. They can testify in our favor."

"There is trouble, my lords," the innkeeper explained sorrowfully.

"I can explain," Kirk began, addressing himself to the two giants instead of the speaker. "We had no intention of killing —"

The giant on the left interrupted. "Our concern is not with your intentions, or the question of killings, noble lord. But it is evident you are strangers here." He indicated the innkeeper, who looked embarrassed. "There is the matter of a shattered window."

It took a minute for the giant's words to penetrate. Once they had, Kirk settled the matter quickly. Spock chided him later for risking his cover by sinfully overpaying, but Kirk paid his first officer little heed. He was too glad to be free of local justice.

One thing was certain: They had encountered an ideal world on which to engage in Kumara's contest.

Local in-town transportation was nonexistent, they discovered the next day, but they had no difficulty in locating the Inn of the Six Rains once they had crossed the town's center. It

seemed that everyone knew everything about the town, a consequence of having to walk everywhere.

The inn itself was nearly a duplicate of the one they had left, even to the fortresslike innkeeper's desk and the dining area opposite it. It had the same raised walkway in between, leading this time to a single stairway at its end. They did have the advantage of two things their old inn did not: booths and a noisy crowd.

Kirk found the atmosphere much more saloonlike than that of their own abode. Drinking was going on in earnest around them, and the air was filled with short, intriguing native laughter, shouting, and pungent smoke.

The innkeeper had assured the gentlemen that the three they searched for were indeed domiciled there. No, they were away at present. Perhaps they would return soon, to greet their friends from the country. In the meantime, why not sit and have good drink and pass tall stories around?

Kirk glanced across the busy tables at the innkeeper's station. He had watched the native carefully when they'd inquired after Kumara. Neither he nor Spock could detect any uncertainty at their questions, any sign of nervousness. The native had acted open instead of devious, and there was little they could do to test him further without arousing suspicions that seemed not to exist.

The three of them sat deep in a high-backed booth, playing at drinking thick wooden mugs of native brew while they carefully scrutinized the swinging doorway.

"Do you really think they'll return here, Captain Kirk?" Char Delminnen wondered uncertainly. Kirk touched the frothy mug to his lips and let a little slide down his throat. It was heady stuff, thick and spicy.

"They've no reason not to. That unfortunate native whose abduction we spoiled indicated that all of Kumara's hirelings are working alone. In fact, he exhibited a downright distaste for working with anyone else. So there's no way for Kumara to know that we've discovered his hiding place."

"That is a certainty, Captain," said Spock with conviction, gesturing toward the entrance.

Three figures came through the swinging doors leading into the inn from the street. Kirk had to blink, so thorough was the Klingon facial makeup. Nevertheless, he could recognize Kumara in the lead, followed by a disgusted-looking Van Delminnen, with another Klingon bringing up the rear of the little party.

Kirk had visions of watching them head straight up to their room, waiting until the Klingons were asleep, then stealing quietly upstairs to knock out any local guards and make off with Delminnen. This fantasy lasted until Char Delminnen jumped up and let out a joyful "Van—it's me, Van!"

About the only thing Kirk could salvage now was the memory of the startled surprise that appeared on Kumara's face.

"Come on, Spock!" Drawing their swords, they rushed toward Kumara.

Kirk engaged the Klingon commander, while Spock took on his assistant. It had been some time since he had worked with a saber, but certain things, once learned, are never forgotten. Not by the mind, and not by the body.

So while Kumara pressed him desperately hard at first, Kirk found himself gaining strength and confidence with each successful parry, each near cut. Char and Van Delminnen were clasping each other happily, chatting away as though neither one's fate and perhaps life was hanging in the balance.

The destruction engendered by the battle, which the other patrons were watching with stoic silence, was enough to bring a pleading, agonized innkeeper out from behind his desk.

"My lords . . . Please, I beg you, my lords! Take your quarrels out in the street. Have pity on me, pity my house, my lords!"

Otherwise occupied, the four combatants utterly ignored him.

Finally the innkeeper turned and whispered something to a solemn little boy, who nodded in comprehension and rushed out. That left the florid proprietor standing before his disintegrating dining area, watching the battle, tight-lipped and silent.

"How—did you find us—Jim?" Kumara wondered, his wrist twisting and turning steadily, precisely.

Kirk caught an overhead blow on the flat of his blade, causing it to slide off harmlessly to his left, and countered with a cut of his own to the waist. He spaced his reply carefully between breaths.

"You should—hire a better class—of assassin, Kumara. The one who—found us—was willing to talk. Money never inspires—much in the way—of loyalty. Pity for you."

"A pity—for you, Jim," countered the Klingon commander, his own sword making half circles in the air. "For now, much—as I dislike the thought—I am compelled—to kill you."

He turned the blade and lunged with the point, forcing Kirk backward.

Spock was pressing his opponent much more seriously. That engagement had begun with the other attacking furiously, wildly, drunk with self-confidence. Spock had blocked, retreated, parried every cut and thrust.

Gradually confidence gave way to rage, while Spock continued methodically to defend himself, content to let his opponent wear himself out—which was precisely what was happening. Now it was the *Enterprise*'s first officer who was pressing the attack, with equal precision, never giving his increasingly desperate counterpart a chance to rest.

An especially hard blow from his saber sent his assailant reeling. Panic showed in the Klingon's face. He backed, parrying wildly. Spock followed close—then suddenly his feet were gone from under him. He had slipped in a pool of stagnant drink, and abruptly found himself flat on his back.

Smiling triumphantly, his opponent jumped forward, his sword swinging high over his shoulder, ready to chop down heavily and slice flesh from bone.

Spock flipped his saber in his hand, caught it by the flat of the blade, and threw. The talkative armorer's claims had not been understated, and that possibly saved Spock's life.

The saber struck bone, but instead of snapping, it slid off. Its momentum carried it on through, its point coming out the back of the Klingon's shirt. A surprised, puzzled expression came over his face. His arm came down, and the sword flew

from his hand. Spock was able to dodge—but not completely. The blade struck his forehead at an angle.

A hand came up, and then, blood welling from the wound, Spock fell back unconscious.

The Klingon officer's gaze turned slowly, slowly downward. It settled on the hurtful thing which penetrated him from front to back. Then his eyes closed, and he toppled onto a deserted table.

All the while, the crowd watched silently.

Kirk didn't see what had happened to Spock. He had no time. Kumara lunged again, forcing the captain back a little farther, and then made a peculiar thrust with his sword that no human could have duplicated. His blade came under Kirk's at the pommel, shoved and twisted—and Kirk's saber flew halfway across the room.

Grinning, Kumara lunged again, as Kirk grabbed a chair and swept it up before him desperately. The Klingon commander's sword pierced the wood and snapped cleanly in half as Kirk continued his swing with the chair.

Cursing, Kumara pulled and threw his knife, which Kirk caught on the chair's backswing. The captain threw the chair at Kumara, drew his own dirk, and followed the projectile. Kumara's hand came up frantically to catch Kirk's wrist, and then the two men were tumbling over and over each other through the sticky, food-filled gaps between the tables.

Both arms swung out and around to strike one unyielding chair leg. Kirk's wrist suddenly became numb, and the knife flew five meters. The combatants continued to roll about, arms and legs thrashing violently.

None of the onlookers attempted to interfere. They continued to watch dispassionately as the two strangers were reduced to swinging weakly at each other, each barely able to fend off the attacks of the other.

"Con—cede." Kumara gasped in pain, his head bobbing loose on his neck as though springs and not ligaments kept it joined to his head.

Kirk shook his head slowly, lacking the strength for a verbal reply—and even that action nearly caused him to collapse.

Several giants entered the room, ducking their heads to pass through the entrance. The largest looked at the room, his gaze traveling slowly from left to right to take in the two Delminnens, now also watching the battle on the floor, the two barely erect combatants weaving in its center, the dead one on the floor, and the injured one lying nearby.

He shook his head slowly from side to side, and the gesture was echoed by many in the silent crowd.

XI

A hand moved lazily, drawing delicate designs in the dust. Kumara considered what he had wrought, then obliterated it with a wave of his palm. His sole real complaint about the cell was that there was nothing to lean against save the chill stone walls.

Otherwise, it was the absence of certain devices which made it far more pleasurable a place to idle than its Klingon counterpart. He forced himself to sit away from the wall as he looked across the straw-and-dirt floor at his companions.

Kirk gazed back quietly. Several hours ago he and Kumara had tried their best to kill each other. Now they sat unbelligerently in the same room, in the same fix, and wished devoutly that their captors would put off doing anything until the contest's time limit had elapsed, at which time their respective transporters would pull them back to the safety of the two cruisers.

If not, Kirk mused, Scotty was liable to beam several corpses aboard the *Enterprise*. One area which the sociologists had not researched was Gypsian penology.

His eyes left Kumara and traveled around the windowless cell. Spock was busy rewinding the bandage around his forehead. The Delminnens sat off in a corner by themselves, still engrossed in each other and no doubt cursing Kirk, Kumara, and all the others who'd meddled in their lives.

"I must compliment you, Mr. Spock," Kumara said into the low drone formed by the Delminnens. "I happened to observe you at the moment when you dispatched Lieutenant Kritt. That was an admirable bit of quick thinking and reaction, which Kritt ought to have anticipated." The commander's mouth twisted into an unreadable expression. "Kritt always was an over-confident fool."

"It was," Spock replied, his voice absolutely flat, "the only logical thing left to do. I had hoped merely to disarm him, not to kill."

"I might have supposed you would say something like that," Kumara declared. Spock did not reply, so the commander turned his gaze heavenward.

"Ah, Gods, what a way for a Klingon officer to die. Here I sit, helpless among my enemies—me, the commander of one of the most powerful instruments in the galaxy. Doomed I am to die via some no doubt unimaginative method concocted by a council of superstitious barbarians."

"Quite a performance, Kumara," Kirk commented when the commander's plaint had ended, "but you always did make a specialty of substituting show for substance. I'm surprised at your resignation. If we can stall things for another day and a half, or if our captors remain inactive, our transporters will pluck us safe and free. And remember, it was your idea that we descend without modern weapons."

"Advanced weaponry could have stimulated latent cowardice," Kumara shot back.

Kirk started to move toward the Klingon, but Spock reached out to restrain him. "Easy, Captain, there is nothing to be gained by fighting now. The opportunity to escape may eventually present itself . . . though I am not optimistic." He looked up. "This cell is well designed with an eye toward preventing any such occurrence." His gaze dropped to Kumara. "Even if it was constructed by mere superstitious barbarians, who are advanced enough to confiscate our communicators."

The Klingon commander had no comment.

"Suppose we did escape?" Kirk turned to look over at Char Delminnen, as did Kumara. "Wouldn't you two have to begin again with Van and me?" There was bitterness in her voice.

Surprisingly, it was Kumara who replied. "Young female, if allowing you and your sibling to depart peacefully homeward would do anything to alleviate our present difficulties, I would be the first to see you safely on your way. Unfortunately, I fear that circumstances have long since been in control of all our destinies, so that, while possibly accurate, your accusations will never be put to the test. I suspect that we are all to be tried together—if the concept of a trial exists on this orphaned world."

"Whatever they have planned for us can't be any worse than Klingon justice," commented Kirk with a vicious smile. Now it was an angry Kumara's turn to start forward.

Spock forestalled further hostilities by assuming a pose of attention and announcing, "Not now, gentlemen. Several people are approaching."

All five hurried to scramble to their feet. A small party of armed men appeared outside their cell. Among them Kirk recognized the jailer, who had brought them food and water, and the leader of the group of giants that had brought them here from the Inn of the Six Rains.

The jailer worked on the crude (but efficient) lock while the rest of the party warily eyed those on the other side of the cementwork.

"You are to be given the privilege of pleading your case before the Justice Council. Come along . . . and mind your words and manner. The Council is not to be trifled with."

Guarded beyond any chance of making a run, they were convoyed up stairs, down corridors, and around bends. The room they finally arrived in was modest in size and decor. At one end was a high bench with a single high podium at its center. This was backed by five empty seats. Auroral blaze lit the room, shafting down through a high-domed glass ceiling.

Several tiered benches formed concentric semicircles at the opposite end of the room, and scattered, somewhat bored natives occupied these. They seemed to perk up a little when the captives entered, though.

Kirk and the others were conducted to a long padded bench which faced the higher bench and podium at the near end of the room. Their guards directed them to sit, then moved to join other guards at the two doors.

A single short, elderly native clad in dress of the utmost simplicity appeared. The grating, off-key tune he played was as weird and unnerving as the trumpetlike instrument he performed it on. At this signal, a hidden door opened behind the podium and five natives—two men and three women—appeared. They assumed the five seats before the captives. Kirk noted with interest that they were also clad in plain dress, including the old man who took the podium seat. There

was nothing to distinguish their office, nothing to differentiate them from the poorest beggar in the streets. Cleanliness, perhaps, but then, even the beggars Kirk had seen in the marketplace had been fairly clean.

They were all solemn and stern-faced, however. "Self-righteous-looking bunch, aren't they?" Kirk found himself whispering to a frozen Kumara.

The Klingon commander let out a derisive snort. "Trial indeed! I will sell you my chance of being found innocent for two *pahds* and a good killing joke."

Spock tapped Kirk on the arm and gestured to the far door at a fat, smug-looking native. "There's the local who called for official help."

Kirk studied the man, who smiled back at him strangely.

"Looks content, doesn't he?" Kirk commented finally, though he was still uncertain of the other's expression. What was behind that peculiar grin? He chalked it up to the simple fact that the innkeeper was by the door while he, Spock, and the others were relative parsecs from that freedom.

Kirk turned his attention back to the judges, for such they had to be. They had all assumed their seats and proceeded to lapse into various postures of indifference. All were incredibly old. One, Kirk noted, was nearly asleep already. Another was deeply engrossed in inspecting her fingernails.

Only the occupant of the podium chair appeared reasonably alert. A portly, grave-visaged native, he took three handfuls of sand from a box on his left and ceremoniously transfered them to a box on his right, all while steadily muttering some whispered alien incantation.

The trial got under way when this formidable-looking individual followed the sand ritual by leaning forward and glaring down at them.

"Well?" he said gruffly.

"Well what?" countered Spock evenly. Kirk eyed his first officer uncertainly.

"How do you plead?" asked the judge irritably.

"I would like to know what we are expected to plead for," Spock continued. "To do that, we must know what we are

accused of."

The judge looked further irritated. "Oh, very well, if you must." He peered down at something hidden from below. "You are all accused of disturbing the peace, letting blood on a forbidden day, destruction of private property, contributing to unnatural death, obfuscation of a legitimate business . . ."

While the list grew, Kumara leaned over and whispered worriedly to Kirk, "Did we do all that, Jim?"

"If he says so," Kirk murmured back, "I guess we did."

". . . and being a public nuisance," the venerable praetor concluded eventually. He looked back down at them and coughed. "Have you anything to say in your own defense?"

That said, he leaned back, crossed his hands in front of him, and appeared to lapse into sleep.

There was a pause from below . . . and then Kumara was on his feet, gesticulating wildly for attention. "I can explain it all, Your Greatness!" Kirk stared at the commander open-mouthed.

"It is all so simple," Kumara said, talking very fast. "My companion and I were preparing to enter our lodging when, without cause or warning, these two ruffians beside me assaulted us." He took on a grieving tone. "Attacked us and murdered my best friend!"

The paralysis finally left Kirk, and he was practically inside Kumara's shirtfront. "Now just a *minute!*"

"Your pardon, sir," said Spock. The judge cocked an eye at the first officer, then looked back at Kirk and Kumara, who were ready to start in on each other again.

"You two sit down and behave yourselves. You, sir," he said to Spock, "may speak."

Kirk and Kumara resumed their seats as Spock rose. "This man and his companion had taken by force another man"—he indicated Van Delminnen—"whom we were trying to rescue, in order to return him to his sister, whom you see seated next to him. As the abductors were unwilling to return him peacefully, we were compelled to resort to force."

"That's a lie!" shouted Kumara, leaping to his feet again. "If *they* had merely turned the woman over to us, none of this

would have happened."

"Is this true, sir?" the judge asked Spock.

"Your Greatness, it may be that the single death of the man I killed in self-defense could have been avoided, but in the long run many—"

"But it *could* have been avoided?" the judge persisted. "In fact, the entire fight could have been avoided?"

"Strictly from a logical point of view, yes," Spock, admitted looking rather unhappy, "but one must consider the long view, and when one does that it is immediately apparent that—"

"That's very interesting, thank you," the judge said, cutting the first officer off.

Kumara looked as though he had won a victory of sorts. "Besides, it is well known that all Vulcans are congenital liars," the commander added.

Kirk looked at his enemy in shock. "Kumara! Do you realize what you're saying?"

The judge looked interested. "And what, pray tell, is a Vulcan?"

Kumara pointed, his anger and frustration having driven him past all rationality now. "*That* is a Vulcan, your greatness! An alien in your midst, an interloper, a monster with a computer for a mind and a machine's sense of ethics! An insipid, unimaginative, soulless automation who—"

Spock bore the steady stream of insults and imprecations stolidly. The judge, looking bored, finally cut Kumara off in mid-insult.

"Your claim that you are innocent will be taken under advisement," he told him tiredly. He looked at Spock. "Do you, whatever or whoever you are, acknowledge the truth of any part of this person's claims?"

"Of course not," Spock said, looking straight at Kumara. The Klingon commander threw up his hands and sat down hard on the bench.

"Thank you, sirs." The judge yawned. "That . . . that will do. I will now consult with my colleagues." He slid down from his chair and began poking and prodding the other ancients to wakefulness. Once active, all five retired behind the podium.

Kirk could hear the tantalizing buzz of their conversation rise and fall, always just outside the range of decipherability.

"You fool!" Kumara whispered angrily at Spock. "Couldn't you see what I was attempting to do? With even one of us free, he might be able to hire help to rescue those reimprisoned!"

Spock's eyebrows rose alarmingly, though his voice remained unchanged. "And you said that *Vulcans* were congenital liars."

Kumara had a properly sarcastic retort prepared, but the reappearance of the five judges forestalled it. He turned as anxiously as the others while the ancients resumed their seats. All seemed almost awake now, as though it were necessary to bestir themselves at least for pronouncement of sentence.

"I see that your bickering has ceased," the high judge observed, with evident satisfaction. "That is well, as we have deliberated and reached a decision." He yawned again.

"Before you make your decision known, Your Greatness, I would like the answers to several questions. You can hardly deny them if you are prepared to execute or imprison us." Spock waited resolutely for a reply.

The high judge considered, and finally grumbled, "Oh, if you must. But make them interesting, lest we lose interest quickly."

"I believe you will find them interesting enough," Spock declared. He began to pace back and forth beneath the high bench, asking his questions as he walked. Kirk and Kumara watched him with equal curiosity.

"Why is it," the *Enterprise*'s first officer wondered, "that, despite the large number of resting places, and a perpetual daylight that would seem to preclude any regular resting time, we have never seen a single one of you even appear drowsy? Why have we not seen a single live animal, despite an abundance of fresh-killed meat in the marketplace?

"Why the total absence of even simple vehicles, and the lack of interest in our battle to the death at the inn? Such a crowd would seem to be the type most interested in such

conflicts, yet they uttered hardly a sound throughout the fighting.

"Then there is the very existence of this world, which defies so many natural laws. Despite this, we find ourselves confronted with a civilization and race that, excepting trivial differences, could be a duplicate of an earlier terrestrial or Klingon culture. That implies a coincidence of evolution under radically different conditions—a coincidence we have until now had no choice but to accept."

"Spock, what are you getting at?" Kirk asked.

His first officer turned to him, the conviction in his voice growing with each succeeding sentence. "Have the events of the past weeks not struck you as rushed, Captain? Do you accept the existence of the world you see around you here, regardless of the fact that our entire body of scientific knowledge declares it a flagrant impossibility?"

"Your first officer is mad, Captain Kirk," declared Kumara, watching Spock warily. "He denies the evidence of his own senses."

"Senses can be fooled," Spock went on, turning to the Klingon commander, "but a rational mind cannot. It has taken until now for the weight of successive incongruities to point out the greater one. I am beginning to believe my mind, not my eyes." He turned back to Kirk.

"Do you accept the existence of this world as you see it, Captain? Because I do not."

Kirk felt the hard wood of the bench beneath him, looked around and saw the eyes of judges, guards, innkeeper, and spectators on him, breathed deeply of the air, studied the iridescent sky through the glass dome, and replied, "Have I a choice, Mr. Spock?"

Spock sighed heavily. "Think, Captain. We have in the past few weeks encountered two near duplicates of Terran ecology and humanoid civilization. In both cases the natives could, with very slight alterations, pass for human, Vulcan, or Klingon with relative ease. Both the world of Arret, in the negative universe, and this wandering planet support such civilizations in heretofore unsuspected astronomical environments. A mere coincidence? It boggles the mind."

Spock turned to face the judges, and Kirk noted with surprise that all five were now wide awake, more attentive than they had appeared at any earlier time.

"Whatever the explanation, you must confess, Your Greatness, whoever you are, that these coincidences leave a great deal unexplained."

"I would say that is putting it mildly, Mr. Spock."

All eyes turned to the source of that voice. Kirk's thoughts turned upside down, as his whole universe had during the course of Spock's speech.

"Karla Five!"

The woman walking toward them from the near door was none other than their pied piper into the negative universe bridged by the Beta Niobe Nova.

"I don't," Kirk muttered plaintively, "understand."

"Nor do I, Captain, but I have suspected. The very unlikeliness of Arret and this world suggested a possible tie, though I am still ignorant as to what it might be."

"Nevermind, Mr. Spock," Karla Five said reassuringly, "it was your willingness to voice what your mind suspected which has decided the trial in your favor. You were beginning to disappoint us." She turned to the judge's bench.

"I believe the time has come to end the masquerade, colleagues." She waved her right arm slowly, expansively.

The courtroom vanished. So did the town. Kirk, Spock, and Kumara found themselves standing alone on a rolling, grassy plain which ran unbroken to every horizon.

Well, not exactly alone . . .

Kirk squinted and held his hands in front of his face to shield himself. Where the judges had sat moments before were now suspended five meter-wide globes of radiant energy, each glowing like a miniature sun. Another globe occupied the position held a moment before by Karla Five.

Perhaps the biggest surprise was the presence of the last two globes, which drifted and swirled about each other in the places occupied only seconds ago by Van and Char Delminnen.

Kirk felt sanity slipping away, like water down a drain, and screamed inside himself for something solid, something real, to hold on to. It was provided by his own mind, which could find no room for panic amid all the curiosity.

"Who . . . what are you?"

The energy thing that had been Karla Five expounded in a deep non-voice. "We are the Wanderers Who Play," the not-words elucidated. "We are Those Who Meddle. We are the ones who long ago—so long ago that your terminology is not great enough to encompass it—deserted our final corporeal bodies for the configurations of pure energy which you now see."

"You said you play," Kirk said, eyes tightly slitted against the wonderful glare. "What do you play at?"

"Existence," the second judge murmured.

"To what purpose?" This typical expression of practicality came, naturally, from Spock.

"Amusement and edification," explained the judge of judges. "At regular intervals we conduct a tour of various galaxies which remain of interest to us. This we do to record the progress and development of the local space-traversing dominants. In this case, yourselves, gentlemen. Our attention is magnified when several dominant forms expand far enough to come into conflict with one another.

"For reasons of convenience, and a certain amount of what you would term nostalgia, we have utilized this world as the vehicle for transporting us through space. It is our original home world. We are attached to it. And, while it serves no real purpose but one, that is sufficient to trouble taking it with us."

"That single purpose is information storage, gentlemen," continued the light that had been Karla Five. "We need a fair-sized solid for that. Our world serves us admirably. We have, of course, no need for the warmth and light which our exceptional atmosphere, as Mr. Spock calls it, provides.

"However, we still enjoy the presence of living things around us. We have the time and patience necessary to luxuriate in the contemplative thought patterns of growing plants."

"You have been undergoing a test," the judge of judges told them, "a test which is now concluded."

"The humanoid civilization?" Kirk asked, gesturing at the open expanse of prairie around them. "The city, its people . . . it was a laboratory experiment, in which we were guinea pigs?"

"Restrain your bitterness, Captain Kirk," said Karla Five. "We mean you neither ill nor good. Allow us this harmless academic pleasantry."

"Lieutenant Kritt didn't find it very harmless," Kumara muttered. Karla Five's reply was filled with reproof.

"That was of your own choice and doing, Commander Kumara. We did not interfere. We only studied. When you and Captain Kirk persisted in your futile battle at the inn instead of attempting to work out a peaceful settlement of your differences, we were most disappointed. Most."

"Terribly sorry," Kumara countered sarcastically. "The experimental animals offer their apologies. Perhaps you didn't bait the maze sufficiently to produce the reactions you wanted."

"Speaking of differences and bait and mazes," Kirk said, "what of that negative universe?"

"It did not exist, not in the form you believed you saw it in," Karla Five told him. "Even we cannot accomplish a passage into something which does not exist. It was created as the first part of your test, from a play theory one of us had generated."

"Mine," said the fifth judge, with a touch of pride. "It was rather a good theory. Pity it does not exist."

"Even if it did," Karla Five went on, "a less likely method of interdimensional travel than diving into a raging nova would be difficult to imagine.

"You accept too readily the evidence of your senses instead of your mind, Captain Kirk, Commander Kumara—even you, Mr. Spock. Think again on the people of Arret—would a race which appeared with all the knowledge it would ever have be able to exist, once its devolution was a known fact? No, it would go mad with the knowledge. Would an Arretian child be born in a grave, as a senile adult form, only to die within a

living mother? For that matter, by what process would a new Arretian come into existence?

"I am surprised at you all for not seeing through that first fabrication. But then it was necessary to bring you together, to see if you would react more sensibly than you did apart. As you know, you have not."

Kirk looked over at Kumara, and found the commander staring back at him. "Negative universe—you too, Kumara?"

The commander nodded slowly. "A mere two *tri-aines* ago. We did not think we would survive. The negative world which aided us was a near duplicate of Klingon. In fact, its name was—"

"Nognilk," put in Spock.

"The very same," admitted the tired commander. "The inconsistencies . . . Why did we not sense them before!"

"And the Delminnens?" Kirk asked.

Somehow the judge of judges managed to convey the impression of indicating the two globes which swirled and darted about each other.

"These two Wanderers were given the task of playing at being human, at being the humans Delminnen. The message from your Starfleet base, Captain Kirk—and your Imperial Sector headquarters, Commander Kumara—was an artifice of ours, designed to bring you hastily to the system designed. We followed your foolishly primitive attempts to unite the human couple through violence with considerable sadness.

"In the end, it seemed that total destruction of one vessel or the other must result. Hence our appearance here at the crucial moment, to prevent that. It was we, Commander Kumara, who planted the suggestion of a contest in your mind."

Kumara looked shaken.

Spock broke in: "But the Delminnens are real people."

"So they are, Mr. Spock," admitted Karla Five. "They continue their hermitage on the far side of their moon from where you set down, quite unaware that anything out of the ordinary has taken place. Incidentally, they are as harmless as your records indicated. Should you return to their system, you

will find planets Eight and Nine orbiting their sun unchanged—their 'destruction' merely being another of our engineered illusions."

"World-maker or not," Kumara whispered to Kirk, "I'd hit it if I could be sure of contacting something."

"We must leave you now, gentlemen," Karla Five continued. "There are many among us who have profited from your actions of the past seconds—seconds only to us, of course, weeks to you. We are sorry at the laggard pace of your development."

"What do you intend to do with us?" Kirk asked hesitantly.

"You will all be returned to your respective ships and permitted to return home. But carry with you this warning, which we make most regretfully.

"If your races have not made substantial improvement over your present degree of maturity, or rather lack of it, by the time of our next visit to this portion of this galaxy, we will be compelled to regard you as degenerates incapable of proper development. Consequently, you will be eliminated from the cycle of advance.

"Good-bye, Commander Kumara." Karla Five glowed bluely, and the Klingon commander was gone.

"Back to his vessel, and McCoy to yours," the globe explained. "And now—"

"Wait!" Kirk shouted. "Why do you care? Why this concern with our development, this need for elaborate interference?"

There was a pause; then: "We strive constantly to upgrade the maturity of those races we encounter, Captain Kirk, in the faint hope that one day one or more of them will reach our own level. It is very lonely to exist at the apex of creation, for an apex is surrounded always only by emptiness."

"How much longer do we have . . . before you return again?" the captain asked hurriedly.

"Not long, I fear," confessed the judge of judges. "No more than another twelve of your millennia. Now go . . ."

And they were gone.

Sulu was studying standard readouts from the world below. He turned to inform Uhura of one especially interesting discovery—and nearly fell from his chair as the captain re-materialized in his. Uhura had started to turn at Sulu's call, only to pause and gasp as the science station was once again occupied by its usual tenant.

Although he stood between the two materializations, Dr. McCoy was too pleased to see both men return alive to be shocked. That would come later.

"Jim . . . Spock! How did I . . . How—what happened down there?"

Kirk felt the comforting solidness of the command chair. That, at least, was real . . . wasn't it? At least it was as real as the mystifying globe sitting alone in the viewscreen. Amazing how one could overlook the obvious when confronted by the impossible.

"Mr. Sulu?"

"Yes, sir?"

"What is the mass of the world below us?"

Sulu looked puzzled, while at Kirk's right McCoy was barely able to hold himself in check. "The mass, Captain? But we already measured—"

"Compute it again, Lieutenant."

Sulu proceeded to carry out the puzzling order, bent closer over his instrumentation, and finally looked back in total confusion.

"I don't understand it, sir. There's a new reading, but it's impossible."

"What is it?"

"According to the latest readings, the mass of Gypsy is only point six four that of Earth. But the gravity reading remains constant. That's impossible."

"Not this time, Mr. Sulu. The gravity is correct, and no doubt artificially enhanced. While the mass—"

"—is undoubtedly correct," Spock finished for him, "for a mobile filing cabinet of such size."

McCoy looked askance from one to the other. "Jim, what is all this . . . this talk of filing cabinets and artificial gravity?

How did you get back here, anyway?"

"Twelve thousand years," Kirk murmured, not hearing.

"What . . . what's that?"

"Captain," Arex reported, "the *Klathas* is picking up speed. She's moving out of the area on impulse power."

Kirk moved to the intercom. "Engineering . . . This is the captain speaking. Scotty, are you there?"

"Aye, Captain."

"Do we have enough power to get under way?"

"Aye, but barely. I think we can manage warp-two, but not much more."

"It'll do. Thank you, Scotty." He clicked off, then turned back to face the helm once more. "Mr. Sulu, set course for Babel. I have a story that's going to interest Commodore April. It seems he and Sarah owe their unexpected rejuvenation to a dream . . . unless that's an illusion too."

"I think not, Captain," declared Spock thoughtfully. "It was the Aprils who pulled us through the first part of the Wanderers' test. Clearly they were impressed. The Aprils' new life strikes me as a realistic reward for . . . for a maze well run."

"Excuse me, sir," Sulu wondered, "but we have superior speed now. Aren't we going after the Klingons?"

"No, Mr. Sulu . . . and they are no longer concerned with us. Kumara has too much else to think about now."

"In heaven's name, Jim," an exasperated McCoy blurted out, "what happened? Why are we suddenly running from the *Klathas* . . . and it from us? And by the way, where's Char Delminnen?"

"Twelve thousand years," Kirk whispered again. Then, louder: "Home is where the heart is, Bones—if the mind concurs. Rest easy that the Delminnens are perfectly safe."

McCoy turned in frustration to Spock, who was busy as usual at his library computer console. "Spock, you tell me. What's Jim mumbling about? What does he mean?"

"What he means, Doctor, is that we had all best learn to be good little boys and girls or we're liable to get spanked."

McCoy, now unable even to voice his questions, gawked at the first officer. Spock turned casually to Kirk. "There is one more thing which worries me, Captain."

"What's that, Mr. Spock?"

"The negative universe of Arret was an illusion. The world of Gypsy was an illusion. Both were part of a test originated by the Wanderers. Yet we have only their word for their own existence . . . the word of illusion creators. What concerns me, Captain, is . . . might not the Wanderers be only part of some greater illusion, some greater test?

"For that matter, how much of our universe is real—and how much an illusion, created by forces unimaginable merely to test us?"

"Mr. Spock," murmured Uhura, "that almost sounds religious."

Spock started to reply, hesitated, and finally said, "It may be interpreted variously, Lieutenant Uhura, but recent experiences tend to make one pause before disregarding anything. What do you think, Captain?"

Kirk looked at the viewscreen, which showed the globe of Gypsy receding into a vast, star-speckled blackness. "I think, Mr. Spock, that we'd better make the best we can of this universe—it's the only illusion we've got, and it's not a bad one."

He leaned back in the command chair and prepared to record the final log entry to the strange episode, then paused, reflective.

Was all life lived only in an illusion, or was his reality someone else's fantasy? Finally, he shrugged and activated the log. The entry he was about to make, detailing the journey to Arret and the subsequent encounter with the Wanderers, would be real enough to him, would form a real record from which someone else would have to make the final judgments. He smiled.

Anyone who read those log entries couldn't possibly dismiss them as illusion . . .

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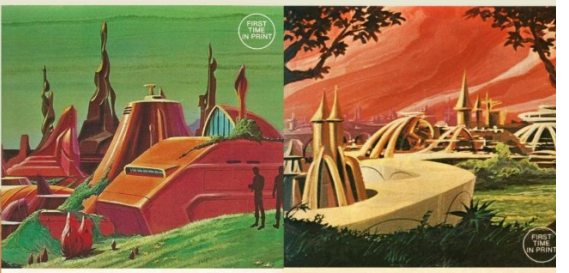

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